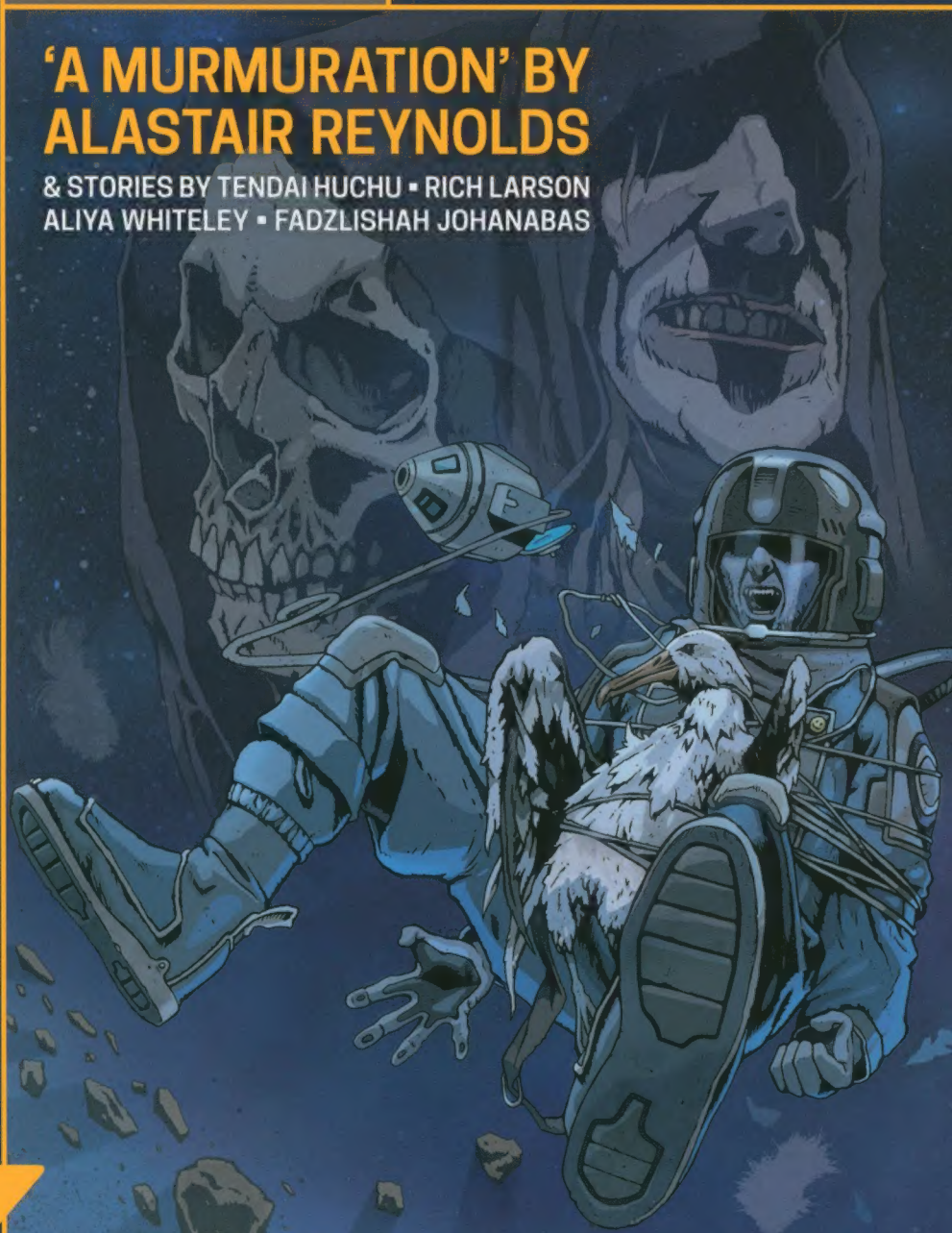
interzone

NEW SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

STORIES · REVIEWS · INTERVIEWS · COMMENT · ART

'A MURMURATION' BY ALASTAIR REYNOLDS

& STORIES BY TENDAI HUCHU • RICH LARSON
ALIYA WHITELEY • FADZLISHAH JOHANABAS



TAKE THE TRIP, TAKE THE LEAP : HELEN MARSHALL INTERVIEWED

DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK • JONATHAN McCALMONT'S FUTURE INTERRUPTED • READERS' POLL
BOOK ZONE • NINA ALLAN'S TIME PIECES • TONY LEE'S LASER FODDER • NICK LOWE'S MUTANT POPCORN

9 770264 359220 02

PRINTED IN THE UK

257

COVER ART BY MARTIN HANFORD · MAR–APR 2015 · £4.99

INTERFACE

HAVE AWARDS FOR GENRE SHORT FICTION HAD THEIR DAY?
Ian Sales

CONTENTS

ANSIBLE LINK
David Langford

READERS' POLL
Vote now for your favourite stories of 2014

FUTURE INTERRUPTED
Jonathan McCalmont

TIME PIECES
Nina Allan

ALIYA WHITELEY INTERVIEWED
Peter Tennant

HAVE AWARDS FOR GENRE SHORT FICTION HAD THEIR DAY? BY IAN SALES

On 13 February, the shortlists for the BSFA Awards were announced. At the beginning of April, during this year's Eastercon in London, the same will happen for the Hugos. This year, the BSFA short fiction shortlist contains only three nominees: two short stories and a novella. Sadly, none are from *Interzone*, or its sister title *Black Static*. In 2013, the Hugo short story category contained only three nominees. Last year, the Hugo had four and the BSFA four. For both awards, shortlists of five or six nominees have been average in the past.

Increasingly often people point out there is now too much short genre fiction being published in any one year to keep up. So how to decide which story is award-worthy? Read them all? Difficult, if not impossible. Voters could choose which stories to read according to the buzz each generates… But typically they will stick to short fiction published in venues they read regularly, or written by people they read regularly. Which means nominations end up spread across a huge number of candidates. And lots of candidates with a few nominations each means stories either fall afoul of the BSFA Awards' three-nominations-minimum rule, or the Hugos' 5% rule, and don't make the shortlist; or, alternatively, a small handful of nominations more than the rest is enough for a story to make the cut.

Is this really a viable method to choose the "best" short story of each year? Is it sustainable? When nominations are spread too thin and too wide, various blocs, fanbases and mutual support groups have more sway on what is shortlisted than they should. It's unrealistic to expect voters to have "perfect knowledge" of eligible stories; it's equally unrealistic to expect voters to select their nominees entirely objectively. While I am perfectly capable of recognising the quality of a piece of short fiction, even if I may not like or enjoy it, I'm going to nominate stories I admire *and* enjoy. And, sometimes, the fact I enjoyed a story may make me esteem it more than it really deserves. And that's before I've even factored in the writer as a person – thanks to social media, readers are much closer to writers now than they ever were in the past (without actually being friends or acquaintances, as was the case last century).

So is there much point in having awards for genre short fiction any more? At a time when voters were likely to have read all the possible candidates, it was hard enough to decide what constituted "best". But given that twenty-first century voters are likely to have read only a small subset of candidate stories, the implication an award is given to the best of *the entire genre* is at best disingenuous, at worst deluded. Stories exist on a spectrum from excellent to execrable. Popular vote awards have never been an effective method of selecting out the best short fiction the genre has to offer – and that's so much more true in 2015 than it was fifty years ago. Perhaps it's time we finally acknowledged this.

interzone

ISSN 0264-3596

Publisher
TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane,
Witcham, Ely, Cambs CB6 2LB, UK
w: ttapress.com
e: interzone@ttapress.com
f: facebook.com/TTAPress
t: @TTApress

Editor
Andy Cox
e: andy@ttapress.com
Assistant Fiction Editor
Andy Hedgecock
Book Reviews Editor
Jim Steel
e: jim@ttapress.com
Story Proofreader
Peter Tennant
e: whitenoise@ttapress.com
Events
Roy Gray
e: roy@ttapress.com

© 2015 Interzone and its contributors

Worldwide Distribution
Pineapple: pineapple-media.com
Central: centralbooks.com
WWMD: specialistmags.co.uk

If your local shops don't stock Interzone please ask them to order it!

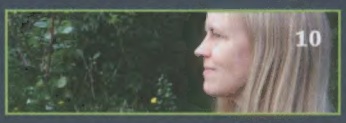
Subscriptions
The number next to your name on the mailing sheet refers to the final issue of your subscription. If it's due for renewal you'll see a mark in the box, and again on an inserted subscription reminder, next to the corresponding issue number. Please renew promptly, and please do so direct with us rather than through a third party.

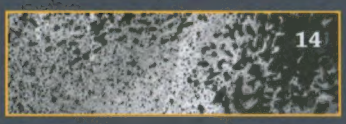
Submissions
Unsolicited submissions of short stories are always welcome via our online system, but please follow the contributors' guidelines.

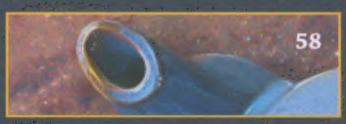
tta

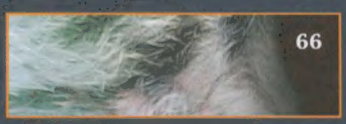
RIME by MARTIN HANFORD (2015 COVER ARTIST)
martinhanford1974.deviantart.com

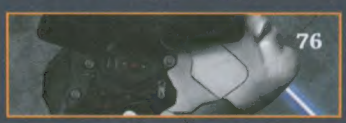
HELEN MARSHALL
interviewed by Andy Hedgecock

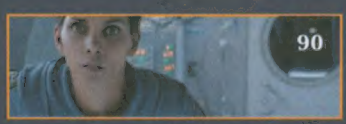












INTERFACE

HAVE AWARDS FOR GENRE SHORT FICTION HAD THEIR DAY?
IAN SALES 1

ANSIBLE LINK
DAVID LANGFORD 4

READERS' POLL 6

FUTURE INTERRUPTED
JONATHAN McCALMONT 8

TIME PIECES
NINA ALLAN 10

ALIYA WHITELEY INTERVIEWED
PETER TENNANT 12

FICTION

A MURMURATION
ALASTAIR REYNOLDS 14
illustrated by Wayne Haag
www.ankaris.com

SONGBIRD
FADZLISHAH JOHANABAS 26
illustrated by Vincent Sammy
karbonk.deviantart.com

BRAINWHALES ARE STONERS, TOO
RICH LARSON 36
illustrated by Warwick Fraser-Coombe
www.warwickfrasercoombe.com

THE WORSHIPFUL COMPANY OF MILLINERS
TENDAI HUCHU 44
illustrated by Richard Wagner
rdwagner@centurylink.net (email)

BLOSSOMS FALLING DOWN
ALIYA WHITELEY 58
illustrated by Richard Wagner

REVIEWS

BOOK ZONE 66
books, including an interview with Helen Marshall

MUTANT POPCORN
NICK LOWE 80
films

LASER FODDER
TONY LEE 90
DVDs & Blu-rays

DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

Passing for Literature. Here's how to do it: '…when the fiction finalists for the National Book Awards were announced, one stood out from the rest: "Station Eleven", by Emily St. John Mandel. While the other nominated books are what, nowadays, we call "literary fiction", "Station Eleven" is set in a familiar genre universe, in which a pandemic has destroyed civilization. The twist – the thing that makes "Station Eleven" National Book Award material – is that the survivors are artists.' (*The New Yorker*)

Awards. Crawford for debut fantasy (tie): Zen Cho, *Spirits Abroad*, and Stephanie Feldman, *The Angel of Losses*. • Rhysling (genre poetry). Long: Mary Soon Lee, 'Interregnum' (*Star*Line* 36.4). Short: Amal El-Mohtar 'Turning the Leaves' (*Apex* 12/13). • Robert A. Heinlein Award: Jack McDevitt, for all his sf. • Skylark: Moshe Feder.

George Lucas, talking to Robert Redford at the Sundance Film Festival, confirmed the dark suspicions of many fans: 'I really have no interest in science fiction at all.' (*Independent*)

Finding Someone Worf Fighting For … was the strapline of this irresistible email: 'We all have our "thing". Sometimes finding someone to love who has the same quirky interests as you can be difficult, even more so when your interests involve pointy ears and phasers. / Trek Dating is a US online dating site for people who love Star Trek. If you want a partner that's passionate about Spock and isn't afraid to go with you at Warp Speed then TrekDating.com is the dating site for you.'

William F. Nolan is the World Horror Society Grand Master for 2015, as voted by members of the World Horror Convention.

Charles Coleman Finlay is the new editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, as of the March/April 2015 issue. Gordon Van Gelder, formerly both publisher and editor, is still publisher. Online submissions welcomed at submissions.ccfinlay.com/fsf/.

As Others See Us. '"Radical life extension isn't consigned to the realm of cranks and science fiction writers any more," says researcher David Masci: "Serious people are doing research in this area and serious thinkers are thinking about this."' (*Guardian*)

In Typo Veritas. 'The matronly old houses seemed to wear the lush foliage of the street's many oaks and maples like fir stoles.' (John Shirley, *Wet Bones*, 1993)

Rose Fox on a forthcoming-novel blurb: '"To call Clive Barker a 'horror novelist' would be like calling the Beatles a 'garage band' … He is the great imaginer of our time. —Quentin Tarantino." Personally, I think that to call Clive Barker a horror novelist would be like calling the Beatles a rock 'n' roll band: entirely accurate, entirely compatible with real talent, and the snobs can go hang.'

As Others See Us II. The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* sets us right in a favourable review of *Game of Thrones*, which in translation says: '…often erroneously regarded as Fantasy, although there are neither magic rings here nor a fantastical triumph of good over evil.' Just boring old mundane dragons.

Awards Shortlists, novel category only. BSFA: Nina Allan, *The Race*; Frances Hardinge, *Cuckoo Song*; Dave Hutchison, *Europe in Autumn*; Simon Ings, *Wolves*; Anne Leckie, *Ancillary Sword*; Claire North, *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*; Nnedi Okorafor, *Lagoon*; Neil Williamson, *The Moon King*. • Kitschies: Nina Allen, *The Race*; William Gibson, *The Peripheral*; Nnedi Okorafor, *Lagoon*; Andrew Smith, *Grasshopper Jungle*; Will Wiles, *The Way Inn*. • Nebulas:

Katherine Addison, *The Goblin Emperor*; Charles E. Gannon, *Trial by Fire*; Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Sword*; Cixin Liu trans Ken Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*; Jack McDevitt, *Coming Home*; Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation*. • Stokers (horror): Craig DiLouie, *Suffer the Children*; Patrick Freivald, *Jade Sky*; Chuck Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*; Christopher Rice, *The Vines*; Steve Rasnic Tem, *Blood Kin*. For links to the full lists see news.ansible.uk/misc/link15.html#feb.

Thog's Masterclass. Dept of Digital Commerce. 'Daniel sat back, steepling his long fingers across his waistcoat. He bought them from a little shop in Brixton Market.' (Paul McAuley, *Something Coming Through*, 2015) • Solid Fuel Dept. '…beyond it was the steel skeleton of the launching platform, and above that, steep and gleaming, towered the magnesium spire of the rocket.' (Robert Abernathy, *Deep Space* [aka *Axolotl*], 1953) • Eyeballs in the Sky. 'Her eyes were a rich, dark green, like a pair of verdantly forested planets.' (Joe Vasicek, *Star Wanderers: Outlander*, 2012) 'Jim stared with all his eyes.' (Isabel Ostrander, *Anything Once*, 1920) • Like a Huge Springing Beast Dept. 'The redhead springs deep and soars through the air. Flying like a spread-eagled amoeba…' (Kieran Shea, *Koko Takes a Holiday*, 2014) • Dept of Useful Add-Ons. 'He rose to his spare elbows.' (Charles E. Gannon, *Fire with Fire*, 2013) • Shock of Hair Dept. 'His ginger hair with its generous dashes of grey sat on his head like an electrified cat.' (J.D. Robb [Nora Roberts], *Strangers in Death*, 2008)

R.I.P.

Andre Brink (1935–2015), South African academic, writer and anti-apartheid campaigner during the bad times, died on 6 February aged 79. His novella *The First Life of Adamastor* (1993) has mythic and fantastic elements.

Brian Clemens (1931–2015), UK screenwriter who wrote for *The Avengers* in its 1960s heyday, died on 10 January aged 83.

James H. Cobb (1953–2014), US author of futuristic naval technothrillers beginning with *Choosers of the Slain* (1996), died on 8 July 2014 aged 61. (Late-arriving report.)

Robert Conroy (1938–2014), US author of a number of alternate-history novels beginning with *1901* (1995) and including the Sidewise Award winner *1942* (2009), died on 30 December.

John Cooper (1942–2015), UK comics artist who drew many strips based on TV sf – including *Captain Scarlet*, *Joe 90*, *Thunderbirds* and *Lady Penelope* for *TV Century 21* and *Blake's 7* and *Doctor Who* for Marvel UK – died on 22 February.

Carl Djerassi (1923–2015), Austrian-born chemist (best known for work on oral contraception) and author of 'lab lit' novels of which *Menachem's Seed* (1997) is borderline sf, died on 30 January aged 91.

Suzette Haden Elgin (1936–2015), US author and linguist whose popular Coyote Jones sf series began with *The Communipaths* (1970), died on 27 January after long illness; she was 78. Other works include the Ozark and Native Tongue trilogies, the latter (her most significant work) making use of her invented women's language Láadan. In 1978 Elgin founded the SF Poetry Association, whose Elgin Award is named for her.

Brett Ewins (1955–2015) UK comics artist who worked on *Judge Dredd*, *Bad Company*, other *2000AD* series, *Hellblazer*, *Skreemer* and *Swamp Thing*, died on 16 February aged 59.

Kazumasa Hirai (1938–2015), Japanese manga writer and sf novelist who created the manga/anime superhero 8 Man and the *Wolf Guy* manga/novel series, died on 17 January; he was 76.

Kris Jensen (Kristine Marie Jensen, 1953–2014), US author of the Ardel sf trilogy comprising *FreeMaster* (1990), *Mentor* (1991) and *Healer* (1993), died on 21 November; she was 61.

Michel Jeury (1934–2015), French author of nearly forty sf titles (some early work being bylined Albert Higon), died on 9 January; he was 80. His *Le temps incertain* (1973) was translated by Maxim Jakubowski as *Chronolysis* (1980).

Roberta Leigh (1926–2014), UK author of romances and children's

fiction who created and produced the TV puppet series *Torchy the Battery Boy* (1957–1959), *Twizzle* (1957) and *Space Patrol* (1963–1968; US *Planet Patrol*), died on 19 December; she was 87.

Colleen McCullough (1937–2015), Australian writer best known for *The Thorn Birds* (1977), whose sf venture was *A Creed for the Third Millennium* (1985), died on 29 January; she was 77. Her obituary in *The Australian* – 'Plain of feature, and certainly overweight, she was, nevertheless, a woman of wit and warmth.' – sparked many parody self-obit tweets, such as Neil Gaiman's 'Although his beard looked like someone had glued it on & his hair would have been unconvincing as a wig, he married a rockstar.'

Frederic Mullally, UK author, journalist and publicist whose alternate-history novel was *Hitler Has Won* (1975), died on 7 September 2014 aged 96. (Late-arriving report.)

Valentin Nicolau, Romanian sf publisher whose Nemira Publishing House (founded 1991) reissued very many world sf classics, died unexpectedly on 13 January; he was 54.

Francisco Porrúa (1922–2014), Spanish editor whose Ediciones Minotauro published his own translations of *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Martian Chronicles*, *The Left Hand of Darkness* and many more, died on 18 December.

Demis Roussos (1946–2015), Greek singer and performer who was lead singer of Aphrodite's Child for such apocalyptic Vangelis-composed albums as *End of the World* (1968) and *666* (1972), died on 25 January aged 68.

Robert San Souci (1946–2014), US author of children's fiction who specialised in retelling international folktales, myths and ghost/supernatural stories – as in *Short & Shivery: Thirty Chilling Tales* (1987) and its successors – died on 19 December aged 68.

Roy Scarfo (1926–2014), US space artist who was creative art director at the General Electric Space Technology Center and illustrator/consultant for NASA and others, died on 8 December; he was 88.

Melanie Tem (1949–2015), US horror/dark fantasy author whose first novel was *Prodigal* (1991; Bram Stoker Award winner), died on 9 February. 'The Man on the Ceiling', written with her husband Steve Rasnic Tem, won Stoker, IHG and World Fantasy awards.

Alice K. Turner (1939–2015), US editor and critic who was fiction editor of *Playboy* 1980–2000 and compiled *The Playboy Book of Science Fiction* (1998), died on 16 January; she was 75. With Michael Andre-Driussi she edited and contributed to the John Crowley critical symposium *Snake's Hands* (2001; expanded 2003).

Once again we're asking you to let us know what you enjoyed (and what you didn't) during the previous year.

You may vote for and against any number of stories published in issues 250 to 255 inclusive (we publish a list of eligible works here to help remind you).

You don't have to have read every issue in order to cast a vote.

As always, we're as keen to hear your opinions of the magazine as we are to get your votes, so don't be shy in letting us know what you think. We'll publish as many comments as we can.

Martin McGrath will be overseeing the poll as usual. Please send him your votes using one of the two methods below.

The results will be published in issue 258, so please make sure your votes and comments are in before March 31st.

VOTE BY EMAIL

interzonepoll@ttapress.com

VOTE ONLINE

ttapress.com/interzone/readerspoll/

VOTE NOW FOR YOUR FAVOURITE STORIES OF 2014

ISSUE 250

The Damaged
Bonnie Jo Stufflebeam

Bad Times to be in the Wrong Place
David Tallerman

The Labyrinth of Thorns
C. Allegra Hawksmoor

Beneath the Willow Branches, Beyond the Reach of Time
Caroline M. Yoachim

Predvestniki
Greg Kurzawa

Lilacs and Daffodils
Rebecca Campbell

Wake Up, Phil
Georgina Bruce

ISSUE 251

Ghost Story
John Grant

Ashes
Karl Bunker

Old Bones
Greg Kurzawa

Fly Away Home
Suzanne Palmer

A Doll is Not a Dumpling
Tracie Welser

This is How You Die
Gareth L. Powell

ISSUE 252

The Posset Pot
Neil Williamson

The Mortuaries
Katharine E.K. Duckett

Diving Into the Wreck
Val Nolan

Two Truths and a Lie
Oliver Buckram

A Brief Light
Claire Humphrey

Sleepers
Bonnie Jo Stufflebeam

ISSUE 253

My Father and the Martian Moon Maids
James Van Pelt

Flytrap
Andrew Hook

The Golden Nose
Neil Williamson

Beside the Damned River
D.J. Cockburn

Chasmata
E. Catherine Tobler

The Bars of Orion
Caren Gussoff

ISSUE 254

Marielena
Nina Allan

A Minute and a Half
Jay O'Connell

Bone Deep
S.L. Nickerson

Dark on a Darkling Earth
T.R. Napper

The Faces Between Us
Julie C. Day

Songs Like Freight Trains
Sam J. Miller

ISSUE 255

Must Supply Own Work Boots
Malcolm Devlin

Bullman and the Wiredling Mutha
RM Graves

The Calling of Night's Ocean
Thana Niveau

Finding Waltzer-Three
Tim Major

Oubliette
E. Catherine Tobler

Mind the Gap
Jennifer Dornan-Fish

Monoculture
Tom Greene

JONATHAN McCALMONT'S FUTURE INTERRUPTED

DEATH, CLOSURE AND THE GREAT GENRE SWINDLE

Back in 2000, Julien Temple made his second attempt at capturing the history of the Sex Pistols in the form of a documentary film. Drawing upon archive footage and interviews with the band's surviving members, *The Filth and The Fury* presents the Sex Pistols and the British punk movement that followed them as an act of defiance against a system that had closed the books on an entire generation of working class kids. Sure...the band might have gone in for the odd publicity stunt and their antics certainly helped to shift over-priced clobber from Chelsea shops but the band would never have enjoyed the success they did if they hadn't managed to connect to something real. Those of us who want to believe in Britain's untapped reserves of revolutionary energy are doomed to buy into this flattering picture of the punk movement but *The Filth and The Fury* only tells half the story.

Temple's first attempt at making a documentary about the Sex Pistols was released a couple of years after the band began to implode. Heavily dependent upon the myths and memories of the band's manager Malcolm McLaren, *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* presents the Sex Pistols as nothing more than a cynical publicity stunt designed to help McLaren "peddle bondage, whips and chains to Britain's children". Wilfully perverse and decried by many as nothing more than the flexing of McLaren's oversized ego, the documentary is best understood as an attempt to preserve punk's nihilistic message by destroying the reputation of a band that was already well on its way to a place in Britain's pop cultural canon. By muddying the waters and suggesting that British punk represented nothing more than £2 million in the pocket of a smartarse Chelsea shopkeeper, McLaren denied the Sex Pistols an uncomplicated place in history and ensured that people would keep debating their ideas and politics for generations to come. Science fiction could stand to learn a lot from Malcolm McLaren as while genre culture certainly loves its revolutions, it has a terrible tendency to tidy them away the second they start to get underfoot.

Like most cultural scenes, science fiction moves between periods of revolutionary expansion and puritanical retrenchment: During expansive periods such as those associated with the New Wave, the New Weird and Feminist SF, the field encourages experimentation as editors reach out to new audiences who might have been turned off by the genre's pre-revolutionary state. While the ideas explored during these expansive phases are never truly lost, they do eventually lose their urgency and their capacity to energise writers and critics. When a revolutionary moment begins to run out of steam, the field naturally cycles round to a period of self-examination and aesthetic retrenchment dominated by musings on the death of science fiction and concerns about what might have been lost in the rush to break new ground and find new audiences.

For reasons that have everything to do with its nature as an American-dominated fandom, genre culture has always been uncomfortable with the negativity engendered by these periods of aesthetic retrenchment. In fact, whenever people like Lester del Rey, Barry N. Malzberg, Charles Platt, or Paul Kincaid stick their head above the parapet to express their concerns about the state of contemporary science fiction, genre culture's first instinct is usually to paint them as the embittered remnants of some notional old guard. Rather than recognising that self-doubt and self-recrimination are part of the process of cultural renewal, the field ignores its own down passage years resulting in a history written in major chords where glorious revolutions spring up out of nowhere only to neatly pack themselves away in time for the next leap forward.

The academic Roger Luckhurst explores genre culture's obsession with death in an article entitled 'The Many Deaths of Science Fiction'. He points out that while anxiety about science fiction having lost its way often manifests itself as a melancholic obsession with the genre's imminent demise, a similar desire for annihilation can be sensed in the field's more expansive moments. For example, Harlan Ellison introduced his seminal 1967 anthology *Dangerous Visions* with the apocalyptic observation that the New Wave "has been found, has been termed good by the mainstream, and is now in the process of being assimilated... Science fiction is dead". Though misguided, echoes of this statement can still be heard whenever a genre writer lands a

deal with a mainstream publisher or a cohort of mainstream authors start churning out decent genre fiction. Luckhurst's analysis may focus upon the relationship between genre and literary fiction but a similarly apocalyptic tone starts to creep in whenever a critic invokes 'evaporating genres' to justify a rapprochement with commercial fantasy or an editor pushes for greater diversity in their tables of content by offering various groups the chance to 'destroy science fiction'.

The reason that death figures so prominently as a recurring motif in the history of science fiction is that both sides of genre culture yearn for narrative closure: The aesthetic puritans invoke the death of science fiction because they believe that science fiction that ceases to engage with the future is no longer science fiction. Conversely, the various flavours of revolutionary expansionist talk about the destruction and transubstantiation of science fiction as a means of liberating writers from a literary tradition they deem outdated and oppressive. Look beyond the rhetoric and what you find are two tendencies resistant to the idea that science fiction is in a continual process of re-invention and change; the traditionalists keep wanting to drag science fiction back to a point closer to their entry into the field while the revolutionaries want to pull the ladder up behind them to prevent the genre from reverting back to engineering puzzle stories the second their back is turned.

Like most cultural scenes, science fiction moves between periods of revolutionary expansion and puritanical retrenchment

What McLaren realised and genre culture has yet to learn is that placing things in a historical context is a great way of denying them power in the present as associating an argument with a particular point in genre history encourages us to view that argument as finished and dealt with. In 2012, the legendary novelist Christopher Priest asked whether the appalling selection of books nominated for that year's Clarke Award suggested that those working towards improving science fiction had lived and fought in vain, thereby implying that the fighting should have stopped once victory had been secured. But how do we know when the battle is won and who gets to make that decision? A real commitment to artistic innovation means that the books never close on old arguments and nobody gets an uncomplicated place in history. Had science fiction absorbed everything it needed to learn by the time the New Wave broke and rolled back down the beach in 1973? Had science fiction dealt with the field's institutional sexism by the time Cyberpunk was burying 1970s Feminist SF under a landslide of historical revisionism? Of course not! A healthy cultural scene is one in which there is no death, no closure and no victory.

In the spirit of *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*, let us throw open the books by smashing the icons of our faith and calling into question the myth of progress that binds today's authors to H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, Mary Shelley, Lucian of Samosata, or whichever household deity you have chosen as your own. Did J.G. Ballard and Michael Moorcock hoist the black flag of modernism because they believed in literary excellence or because they knew that mainstream publishers paid better than the collapsing market for pulp magazines? Did Cyberpunk strike a genuine nerve or did a couple of film producers pick up the rights to *Neuromancer* and spend a small fortune promoting what they thought was going to be the next *Blade Runner*? Is it natural for the boundaries between genres to soften or did someone realise that novels containing fantastical elements tend to sell a whole lot better than straight science fiction? Does the current drive for increased diversity reflect a genuine interest in exploring historically marginalised subjectivities or is it just that the market for adult genre novels continues to decline while the far more diverse field of young adult literature expanded by 38% in 2014 alone? A thriving literary culture will always have more used for live swindlers than dead saints.

NINA ALLAN'S TIME PIECES

A WORD CHILD

By my reckoning and if my sums are correct, you should be holding this magazine in your hands sometime around International Women's Day on March 8th, which seems to me like an appropriate moment to celebrate one of the writers who's been huge in my reading life and in my canon of writing inspirations from the moment I first encountered her fiction in the mid eighties, just as I was about to leave home for university. This woman didn't write speculative fiction as such, though her work seemed to me then as it seems now to hover perpetually on the border between the real and the unreal, the known and the unknowable. She's unfashionable these days – younger readers especially complain that her novels are all Oxford dinner parties and double-barrelled names. I can understand this complaint – who knows how I'd feel if I were twenty again and reading her in 2015 instead of 1985; would I get her? I hope so, but of course I can never know – and yet I regret it deeply. I sense – indeed I know – that those readers who find themselves unwilling to suspend their disbelief are missing something, something it's hard to put a finger on exactly but, as with all the best speculative fiction, is instantly recognised and appreciated by those who have their ear in. Like all artists who are truly great, she was one of a kind, groundbreaking in her day and a landmark to look back on. The writer I am talking about is Iris Murdoch.

With International Women's Day firmly in mind, let's talk first about Iris Murdoch's feminism. I've seen critiques of Murdoch that dismiss her writing as being unengaged with contemporary feminism, complaining that unlike some of the other great British women writers of the period – Doris Lessing, A.S. Byatt, Margaret Drabble – Murdoch didn't write directly about women's issues and so couldn't have cared about them. This of a woman who wrote, again and again, about women struggling with issues of intellectual and spiritual identity, women determined to prove themselves equal with men in terms of their capacity for abstract reason and self-determination, who assumed women's independence and sexual freedom as theirs by right and above being argued over. Murdoch lectured in Philosophy and worked in a refugee camp for displaced persons in the aftermath of World War Two. She dressed how she liked, spoke her mind unflinchingly, displayed calm yet determined disregard for conventional and traditional notions of what a woman should say or be or do. She was a feminist by living as one, indeed a pioneer. Murdoch's message, woman to woman, might be summarised in the adjuration to be what you are – *just do it*.

Here is the first passage of Iris Murdoch I ever read:

> I was sitting, with this notebook beside me, upon the rocks just above my cliff, and looking out over the water. The sun was shining, the sea was calm… Shortly before this I had been looking intently into a rock pool and watching a remarkably long reddish faintly bristling sea worm which had wreathed itself into curious coils prior to disappearing into a hole. I sat up, then settled myself facing seaward, blinking in the sun. Then, not at once but after about two minutes, as my eyes became accustomed to the glare, I saw a monster rising from the waves.

This is retired actor Charles Arrowby, at the beginning of Murdoch's 1979 Booker-Prize-winning novel *The Sea, The Sea*. I've tried introducing several friends to Charles, with hilarious results. Without exception they have found him excruciating: pompous, pedantic, totally self-absorbed and obsessed with food. I'm not about to argue with any of this, because it's all true. He's also highly articulate and self-aware, not least of his faults. Charles is what he is, love him or loathe him or both. He also tells us a story that is compelling and tortuous and layered in mystery and nostalgia. I've read *The Sea, The Sea* four times, and yet reading that paragraph again now I know I could launch myself in again, right this minute, and fall equally under its spell all over again.

Charles's sea serpent – was it real, or simply an optical illusion based around his examination of the bristle worm a couple of minutes earlier? – could stand as the perfect metaphor for the liminal, the almost-fantastic in all of Murdoch's fiction. The blissful unselfconsciousness with which Murdoch – through Charles – introduces such an apparition into her narrative is also highly significant. Murdoch was never afraid to show us a world in which

She was a feminist by living as one, indeed a pioneer. Murdoch's message, woman to woman, might be summarised in the adjuration to be what you are – *just do it*

sea monsters might, after all, exist – why the hell shouldn't they?

It is this independence of spirit, this disregard for what might be deemed bizarre or unacceptable within more traditionally mimetic literature, that marks her out as a thinker and as a writer, and indeed these irruptions of the fantastic occur throughout her oeuvre. Her fourth novel *The Bell* (1958) has tales of ghostly nuns, and her sixth *The Unicorn* (1963) is a full-on gothic melodrama, a variant on the Sleeping Beauty archetype written in the same knowingly mischievous spirit as Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. There's a talking dog in *The Green Knight* (1993), also a character who appears to have come back from the dead. Strangeness abounds. One of the most attractively perplexing attributes of an Iris Murdoch novel is that you never know what's going to happen next – and anything might.

What I personally find most energising and important in Murdoch's writing is the sense of her novels not as a series of individual 'next books' – mere products to be consumed – but as a continuum, a personal journey of discovery she was committed to as a lifelong endeavour. In a literary landscape where increasing commercial pressures and the 'book a year' mentality among publishers have conspired to make such an attitude of vocation an increasing rarity, we should feel particularly lucky that Iris Murdoch was generous enough to invite us along for the ride.

So what would I suggest as recommended reading for a Murdoch newbie? In spite of Charles Arrowby, or even because of him, I am determined to persist in my opinion of *The Sea, The Sea* as the perfect place to start with Iris Murdoch. It's not just that mysterious sea monster – it's the tale of obsession, kidnap and kind-of murder that comes after it, the lyrical hyperbole of Charles's delicious narrative. This novel has important things to tell us about the dangers of nostalgia, of the impossibility of return and the harmful perversity inherent in remaking love in our own image. A *Word Child* (1975) has more of the same – and if you hated Charles Arrowby, just wait until you meet Hilary Burde…

For those who want to get an idea of what Murdoch is about but don't feel like diving into a 500-page stew of heightened emotion, I'd recommend *A Severed Head*, probably the finest of her more concise early works, yet still complete with utterly selfish male protagonist and the women who are about to challenge his status quo and thus make his life uncomfortable in unforeseen ways. *A Severed Head* is also the closest you're likely to come, in Iris Murdoch, to laughing out loud.

My favourite though would have to be *The Book and the Brotherhood* (1987), the most sprawling of her sprawling later works, and utterly mad in all the most rightful implications of that word: radical, freethinking, boundary-defying, almost hallucinogenic in its willingness to contemplate the eternal. *The Book and the Brotherhood* is the first Murdoch novel I bought and read at the time of publication. That, and the fact that some important scenes take place in Oxford, a city I was coming to know myself at exactly that time, might have something to do with my particular affection for it. But how could I not love a novel centred around a book that is forever in progress but never appears, characters hell bent on destroying each other in the most inventive of ways, and one poor guy who ends up taking the rap – terminally – for everyone concerned? You'll either love this monster or blame me forever for recommending it. But you won't find another book like it, that I guarantee.

As a personal postscript, I realised for the first time while writing this essay that I'd inadvertently named my alternate Britain in my own novel *The Race* after the dark (and pathologically selfish, just in case you're wondering) magus in *The Book and the Brotherhood* – Crimond, and its language Crimondn. I cannot help thinking this is not a coincidence.

ALIYA WHITELEY INTERVIEWED BY PETER TENNANT

Your novella *The Beauty* struck me as, in part at least, an examination of the rigidity of gender roles. What are your thoughts on this issue? How do you define somebody as a man or a woman? How central do you think gender is to personal identity? To what degree is identity a case of nature or nurture?

I don't have simple answers to any of those questions. In some ways *The Beauty* is meant to be a vehicle to explore those ideas. I do know *The Beauty* is not meant to sway anyone to a certain point of view so much as suggest that the truth lies beneath the surface of what is presented to us as definitions of male and female on a daily basis. I'm thinking of the section of the book where the narrator finds an old copy of *Cosmopolitan* or whatever, and can't recognise it as containing any sort of beauty, because it's not relevant to his life. So perhaps it's about asking people to look objectively at what information comes from their social frameworks.

I hope the novella provokes more questions than answers. I wonder if there are any sort of real answers to the questions it raises that wouldn't leave out more people than it included. I think it's okay to not know, and to be aware that all opinions are in flux.

What was your original inspiration for the story? Were you aware of similar works, such as Philip Wylie's *The Disappearance* and *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ? Were any of these an influence on your own interpretation of the theme of a one gender society?

I was interested in how women write men, and men write women. Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* was much in my mind, and also I'd received some constructive criticism about how the male characters I'd written so far tended to be untrustworthy and shallow, so that was an issue I wanted to address. Nathan, the Narrator of *The Beauty*, was therefore a bit of a writing exercise initially, but then the story started to slot into place around the character and I realised I wanted to write this post-apocalyptic tale with no women present at all. At that point I looked up when and where it had been done before, but made the decision to not read any of those books so that I'd have a relatively uninfluenced crack of the whip at it.

Once I'd finished writing *The Beauty* the first thing I read along the theme of the death of an entire sex was Frank Herbert's *The White Plague* because I'm a huge Herbert fan and I thought if anyone had gone down the intense route with it, it would be him. But it was entirely different from what I had imagined, and turned out to be your classic 'race against time save the world' type of book. Still, it's a really interesting contrast to my novella, if you want to see how many variations can come from the same theme.

In fact, it was Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood* that I felt most strongly influenced me, for suggesting the possibilities of a third sex, and the challenge of otherness and change that might present.

This is the first time that I can recall reading anything from you at novella length. Was this a new departure for you, or have I simply missed previous work? What is the appeal of novella length for you, particularly with regard to this story? What could you do at this length that wouldn't be possible with a novel or short story?

It's a combination of depth and intensity, for me, at this length. I didn't plan it that way, but it soon became obvious in the process of writing it that it wouldn't extend to a novel and there was far too much for a short story, so there it was. I hadn't written a novella before, but wrote another one straight after *The Beauty*. I got bitten by the bug for that length, where I've found I don't have to complicate the singular narrative strand, but can get really up close with my character and explore motivations that might get skimmed in a short story. It has a strangely deep and resounding feeling, and I can sustain an unusual voice at novella length without outstaying my welcome.

Another aspect of the book that struck me strongly was its depiction of the nature of power, those who have it and how it is exercised. Where do you draw the line between a consensus democracy and a less idealistic form of situational pragmatism or benevolent despotism, positions that in the book seem to be represented by William and Ted respectively?

What's interesting about the feedback I've had on the book is that people have very different opinions about Ted in particular. Some see him as a straightforward villain, and others have said that

he was the only one willing to step up and fight for the group. I don't feel like I could strongly defend or attack him, and I really like the fact that he polarises opinion (as do the strange mushroom figures that arrive). Again, it's a series of ideas to which I can't present answers because I don't see any simplistic ones. But certainly William, Ted and Nathan represent different forms of government and the strengths and weaknesses of all are presented in the crucible of that incredibly stressful and unique moment.

***The Beauty* is most obviously a work of Science Fiction, but with Horror grace notes. In the past you've written work that could fall under a mainstream umbrella and crime fiction, plus all points between. How happy are you with genre labels? What label, if any, do you think would best suit you? And, from a career/marketing perspective, would producing work that is easily classified be a good thing?**
I'm really rubbish at genre labels and the moment I try to write a particular genre then some other genre pops up and demands to get in on the action. The only time I'd found it a problem was when I was meant to be writing a sequel (to *Light Reading*, which was marketed as a crime novel) and the ideas would not stay as crime. I ended up with a strange, dark, literary hybrid with SF overtones that wouldn't behave.

I think, from a marketing point of view, I'd probably make it a lot easier for departments to sell me if I did one thing, but the aspect of writing I've always loved, and wanted to create for myself, is that moment of complete surprise. When I was young I'd go to the library and choose books and I wouldn't know anything about the author or the genre. I came without expectations and when I realised I had no idea where a story was going I was gripped and thrilled and utterly in awe of the writing (although it has since occurred to me that I just hadn't realised what each genre entailed yet, of course). I found it in George Eliot and Graham Greene and Michael Moorcock and Diana Wynne Jones, in just a few cases. So that was the kind of writer I wanted to be. I still strive to surprise.

Do you ever test out actions in your fiction by trying or simulating them yourself?
No, but I talk through scenarios with people I trust to get my thoughts straight about what's happening. Sometimes I use things that have happened to me already in the writing, but that's rare. It's all the head, really, for me.

Does mental or physical pain affect or influence your writing?
I suspect mental or physical pain affects everything that everyone does; any form of suffering makes its way into your personality, or on to the page if you're a writer.

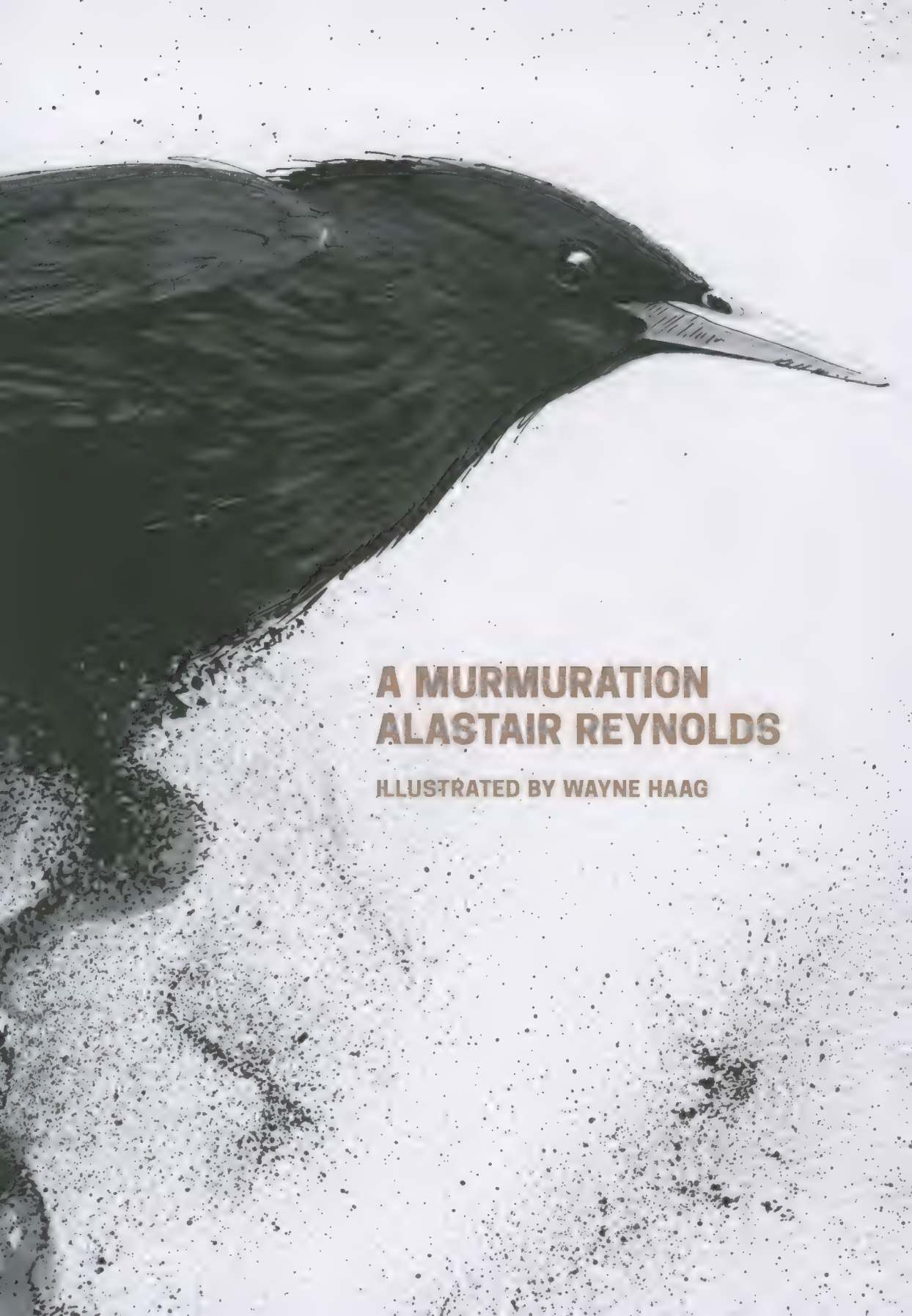
Does music inspire your work?
No, I can't take a musical prompt and easily take inspiration from it. Having said that, I'm always listening to music when I write, particularly classical or jazz, purely because lyrics quickly turn into an annoyance.

There have been key scenes in my novels that have needed a certain song played over and over again, just to get the mood right. In *Three Things About Me* there was Janis Joplin's 'Me and Bobby McGee'. And I once wrote a book (unpublished) about a woman who was obsessed with Acker Bilk, and I listened to an old record I had of his all the time. It was far from the best thing I've ever written but there was something meditative about listening to Acker Bilk for hours on end.

What can we expect to see from you in the near future? What work do you have in the pipeline?
The new novel, *Skein Island*, is out now from Dog Horn Publishing. It's about a library filled with the written documents of thousands of women, and how their words are used to feed a very old and malevolent monster. It's also about the ways that we make people into heroes and villains, and how those roles affect us.

There are also short stories coming up in different magazines and anthologies, so 2015 should be an exciting year for me.

The Beauty is published by Unsung Stories. Questions 6, 7 and 8 were provided by *Interzone* readers Roy Gray and Chris Roper.



A MURMURATION

ALASTAIR REYNOLDS

ILLUSTRATED BY WAYNE HAAG

WHAT WE CALL THE 'HUT' IS A COUple of insulated portable cabins, with a few smaller sheds containing generators, fuel, wind turbine parts and so on. The main cabin contains a chemical toilet, a wash basin, basic cooking facilities and a set of bunk-beds. The second cabin holds our desks, computer equipment and supply stores. Two or three of us can share the hut at a time, but there is not normally a need for more than one to keep an eye on the experiment. Resources being tight, lately we tend to come out on our own.

In all honesty, I prefer it this way. Birds draw out the solitude in us. They repay patience and silence – long hours of a kind of alert, anticipatory stillness. The days begin to blur into each other; weekends and weekdays becoming arbitrary distinctions. I find myself easily losing track of the calendar, birds and weather becoming my only temporal markers. I watch the migration patterns, record the nuances of altering plumage, study the changeful skies. I could not be happier.

There is just one thing to spoil my contentment, but even that, I am confident, will soon be behind me.

I *will* finish the paper.

IT SOUNDS easy, put like that. A vow. A recommitment, a redoubling of my own efforts. One last push.

It started easily enough – the usual set of objections, no real hint of the trouble to come. Very few papers ever go through without some amendments, so none of us were bothered that there were a few issues that needed addressing. But when we had fixed those, the anonymous referee came back with requests for more changes.

We took care of those, but still the referee wanted more of us. This kept going on. Just when we think we have addressed all possible doubts, the referee somehow manages to find something new to quibble with. I do my best to be stoic, reminding myself that the referee is just another scientist doing her job, that they too are under similar pressures, and that I should not feel under any personal attack.

But I only have to glance at their comments.

The authors are inconsistent in their handling of the normalisation terms for the correlation function of the velocity modulus. I am not convinced that their treatment of the smoothed Dirac delta-function is rigorous across the quoted integral.

My blood boils. I entertain a momentary fantasy of meeting the referee out here, on some lonely strip of marshland, of swerving violently and running them into a ditch.

Asking, as I watch them gag on muddy water: "Rigorous enough for you now?"

THE BASIS of our experiment is a ring of twenty tripods, arranged in a two kilometre circle. The hut is on one side of the circle, the wind turbine offset a short distance from the other side. During the day I check all the tripods, picking the least waterlogged path in the 4WD.

Each unit carries a pair of stereometric digital cameras. The lenses need to be kept clean, the power and electronic connections verified. The cameras should be aimed into the middle of the perimeter, and elevated sufficiently to catch the murmuration's epicentre. The cameras are meant to be steerable, but not all of the motors work properly now.

Beneath each camera is a grey digital control box. The boxes contain microprocessor boards, emergency batteries, and the rectangles of their internal ethernet modules, flickering with yellow LEDs. The boxes are supposedly weatherproof but the rain usually finds a way into them. Like the motors, there have been some failures of the circuit boards.

About one in five of the stations have more equipment. On these units we also included laser/radar rangefinders and Doppler velocity recorders. These in turn require extra processors and batteries in the control boxes, which is yet more to go wrong. The effort is worth it, though.

The equipment allows us to track the instantaneous vectors of anything up to two hundred and fifty thousand birds, perhaps even half a million, in a single compact flock. Our spatial/temporal resolution is sufficient to determine wing movements down to the level of specific feather groups. At the same time we also gather data on the attentional shifts implied by eye and head tracking of individual birds.

The human eye sees a blurring of identities, birds becoming the indistinguishable, amor-

phous elements of some larger whole. The cameras and computers see through all of that. I know the science, I know the algorithms, I know our data-carrying capacity. All the same, I am still quietly astonished that we can do this.

When the cameras are checked, which can take anywhere between three and six hours, I have one final inspection to perform. I drive to the wind turbine, and make a visual inspection of the high grey tower and the swooping blades. More often than not there is nothing to be done. The blades turn, the power flows, our electrical and computer systems work as they are meant to.

The rest is down to the birds.

IT'S ODD, really, but there are times when I find even the hut a little too closed-in and oppressive for my tastes. Sometimes I just stop the 4WD out here, wind the window down, and watch the light change over the marsh. I like it best when the day is overcast, the clouds sagging low over the trees and bushes of the marsh, their greyness relieved only by a bold supercilial swipe of pale yellow above the horizon. Birds come and go, and but it's too early for the roosting. I watch herons, curlew, reed warblers – sometimes even the slow, methodical patrol of our resident marsh harrier. She quarters the ground with the ruthless precision of a surveillance drone.

Beyond the birds, the only constancy is the regular swoosh of the turbine blades.

It's a good time to catch up on work or reading.

I pull laser-printed pages from the unruly nest of the glove compartment, along with tissues, cough sweets, empty medicine packets, a scuffed CD without a case. I rest a stiff-backed road atlas on the steering wheel, so that I can write on the pages.

I've already marked up certain problematic passages in yellow highlighter. Now I use a finer pen to scribble more detailed notes in the margins. Eventually I'll condense these notes into a short email to the journal editor. In turn they'll forward them on to the author of the paper I am refereeing.

This is how it works. I'm engaged in a struggle with my own anonymous referee, half-convinced that they've got it in for me, while at the same time trying to be just as nit-picking and difficult for this other author. Doubtless they feel just as irritated by me. But from my end, I know that there's nothing personal in it. I just want the work to be as good as it can be, the arguments as lucid, the analysis as rigorous. So what if I know the lead author, and don't particularly care for her? I can rise above that.

I hold one of the sheets up to the yellowing sky, so that the band of light pushes through the highlit yellow passages. I read back my own scrawl in the margins:

Sloppy handling of the synthetic correlation function – doesn't inspire confidence in rest of analysis.

Am I being too harsh with them?

Perhaps. But then we've all been through this mill.

STARLINGS GATHER, arriving from all directions, concentrating in the air above the copse of trees and bushes near the middle of the study area. They come in small numbers, as individuals or in flocks of a few dozen, before falling into the greater mass. There is no exact threshold at which the concentration of birds becomes a recognisable murmuration, but it needs at least a few thousand before the form begins to emerge as a distinct phenomenon in its own right, with its swooping, gyring, folding cohesiveness – a kind of living membrane in the sky.

Meanwhile, our instruments record. One hundred parametric data points per bird per millisecond, on average, or upwards of fifty gigabytes of data for the whole murmuration. Since the murmuration may persist for several tens of minutes, our total data cube for the whole observation may contain more than thirty terabytes of data, and a petabyte is not exceptional. We use some of the same data-handling and compression routines as the particle physicists in CERN, with their need to track millions of microscopic interaction events. They are tracking tiny bundles of energy, mass, spin and charge. We are tracking warm, feathery bodies with hearts and wings and twitchy central nervous systems!

All of it is physics, though, whether you are studying starlings or quarks.

On my workstation I sift through slices of the data with tracker-wheels and mouse glides.

I graph up a diagram of the murmuration at a moment in time, from an arbitrary viewing angle. It is a smear-shaped mass of tiny dots, like a pixelated thumbprint. On the edges of the murmuration the birds are easily distinguishable. Closer to the core the dots crowd over each other, forming gradients of increasing concentration, the birds packing together with an almost Escher-like density. Confronted with those black folds and ridges, it is hard not to think of the birds as blending together, clotting into a suspended, gravity-defying whole.

I mouse click and each dot becomes a line. Now the smear is a bristly mass, like the pattern formed by iron filings in the presence of a magnetic field. These are the instantaneous vectors for each bird – the direction and speed in which they are moving.

We know from previous studies that each starling has a direct influence on – and is in turn influenced by – about seven neighbours. We can verify this with the vector plots, tracking the change in direction of a particular bird, and then noting the immediate response of its neighbours. But if that were the limit of the bird's influence, the murmuration would be sluggish to respond to an outside factor, such as the arrival of a sparrowhawk.

In fact the entity responds as a whole, dividing and twisting to outfox the intruder. It turns out that there is a correlation distance much greater than the separation between immediate neighbours. Indeed, that correlation between distant birds may be as wide as the entire murmuration. It is as if they are bound together by invisible threads, each feeling the tug of the other – a kind of rubbery net, stretching and compressing.

In fact, the murmuration may contain several distinct 'domains' of influence, where the flight patterns of groups of birds are highly correlated. In the plot on my workstation, these show up as sub-smears of strongly aligned vectors. They come and go as the murmuration proceeds, blending and dissipating – crowds within the larger crowd.

This is where the focus of our recent research lies. What causes these domains to form? What causes them to break up? Can we trace correlation patterns between the domains, or are they causally distinct? How sharp are the boundaries – how permeable?

This paper, the one that is bouncing back and forth between us and the referee, was only intended to set out the elements of our methodology – demonstrating that we had the physical and mathematical tools to study the murmuration at any granularity we chose. Beyond that, we had plans to produce a series of papers which would build on this preliminary work with increasingly complex experiments. So far we have been no more than passive observers. But if we have any claim to understand the murmuration, then we should be able to predict its response to an external stimulus.

I am starting to sense an impasse. Can we honestly go through this all over again with our next publication, and the one after? The thought of that leaves me drained. We have the tools for the next phase of our work, so why not push ahead with the follow-up study, and fold the results of that back into the present paper? Steal a march on our competitors, and dazzle our referee with the sheer effortless audacity of our work?

I think so.

THE NEXT day I set up the sparrowhawk.

I need hardly add that it is not a real sparrowhawk. Designed for us by our colleagues at the robotics laboratory, it is a clever, swift-moving drone. It has wings and a tail and its flight characteristics are similar to those of a real bird. It has synthetic feathers, a plastic bill, large glassy eyes containing swivel-mounted cameras. To the human eye, it looks a little crude and toy-like – surely too caricatured to pass muster. But the sparrowhawk's visual cues have been exaggerated very carefully. From a starling's point of view, it is maximally effective, maximally terrifying. It lights up all the right fear responses.

Come the roost, I set down a folding deck chair, balance the laptop in my lap, stub my gloved fingers onto the scuffed old keyboard, with half the letters worn away, and I watch the spectacle. The sparrowhawk whirrs from the roof of the 4WD, soars into the air, darts forward almost too quickly for my own eyes to track.

It picks a spot in the murmuration and arcs in like a guided missile.

The murmuration cleaves, twists, recombines.

The sparrowhawk executes a hairpin turn and returns for the attack. It skewers through the core of the flock, jack-knifes its scissor wings, zig-zags back. It makes a low electric hum. Some birds scatter from the periphery, but the murmuration as a whole turns out to be doggedly persistent, recognising on some collective level that the sparrowhawk cannot do it any real damage, only picking off its individual units in trifling numbers.

The sparrowhawk maintains its bloodless attack. The murmuration pulses, distends, contracts, its fluctuations on the edge of chaos, like a fibrillating heart. I think of the sparrowhawk as a surgeon, drawing a scalpel through a vital organ, but the tissue healing faster than the blade can cut.

Never mind – the point is not to do harm, but to study the threat response. And by the time the sparrowhawk's batteries start to fade, I know that our data haul will be prodigious.

I can barely sleep with anticipation.

BUT OVERNIGHT, there's a power-outage. The computers crash, the data crunching fails. We run on the emergency generator for a little while, then the batteries. Come morning I drive out in the 4WD, open the little door at the base of the tower, and climb the clattery metal ladder up the inside. There are battery-operated lights, but no windows. The ladder goes up through platforms, each a little landing, before swapping over the other side. Heights are not my thing, but it's just about within my capabilities to go all the way to the top without getting seriously sweaty palms or stomach butterflies.

At the top, I come out inside the housing of the turbine. It's a rectangular enclosure about the size of our generator shed. I can just about stand up in it, moving around the heavy electrical machinery occupying most of the interior space. At one end, a thick shaft goes out through the housing to connect to the blades.

The turbine is complicated, but fortunately only a few things tend to go wrong with it. There are electrical components, similar to fuses, which tend to burn out more often than they should. We keep a supply of them up in the housing, knowing how likely it is that they will need swapping out. I am actually slightly glad to see that it is one of the fuses that has gone, because at least there is no mystery about what needs to be done. I have fixed them so many times, I could do it in my sleep.

I open the spares box. Only three left in it, and I take one of them out now. I swap the fuse, then reset the safety switches. After a few moments, the blades unlock and begin to grind back into motion. The electrical gauges twitch, showing that power is being sent back to our equipment. Not much wind today, but we only need a few kilowatts.

Job done.

I think of starting down, but having overcome my qualms to get this high, I cannot resist the opportunity to poke my head out of the top. At the back of the electrical gear is a small ladder which leads to an access hatch in the roof of the housing.

I go up the short steps of the ladder, undo the catches, and heave open the access hatch.

My knees wobble a bit. I push my head through the hatch, like a tank commander. I look around. There's a rubberised walkway on top, and a set of low handrails, so in theory I could go all the way out and stand on top of the housing. But I've never done that, and I doubt that I would ever have the nerve.

Still with only my head jutting out, I look back at the hut, a huddle of pale rectangles. The perimeter circle is hard to trace from this elevation, but eventually I glimpse the spaced-out sentinels of the tripods, with the scratchy traces of my own wheel tracks between them. Then I pivot around and try to pick out the causeway. Telegraph poles offer a hint of its direction. But it's harder to follow than I expect, seeming to abandon itself in a confusion of marsh and bog. I squint to the horizon, looking for a trace of its continuation.

Strange how some things are clearer to the eye at ground level, than they are from the air.

Birds must know this in their bones.

THE NEXT day, the computers up and running again, I squeeze our data until it bleeds science. With the vector tracking, we can trace the response to the sparrowhawk across all possible

interaction lengths. Remarkable to see how effectively the 'news' of the sparrowhawk's arrival is disseminated through that vast assemblage of birds.

Because there is no centralised order, the murmuration is best considered as a scale-free network. The internet is like that, and so is the human brain. Scale-free networks are robust against directed attacks. There is no single hub which is critical to the function of the whole, but rather a tangle of distributed pathways, no one of which is indispensable. On the other hand, the scale-free paradigm does not preclude the existence of those vector domains I mentioned earlier. Just as the internet has its top-level domains, so the brain has its hierarchies, its functional modules.

Would it be a leap too far to start thinking of the murmuration as hosting some level of modular organisation?

I jot down some speculative notes. No harm in sleeping on them. In the meantime, though, I write up the sparrowhawk results in as dry and unexciting manner as I can manage, downplaying any of the intellectual thrill I feel. Passive voice all the way. *The sparrowhawk was prepared for remote control. Standard reduction methods were used in the data analysis. The murmuration was observed from twenty spatially separated viewing positions – see Fig. 3.*

The way to do science is never to sound excited by it, never to sound involved, never to sound as if this is something done by people, with lives and loves and all the usual hopes and fears.

I send the latest version of the paper back to the journal, and cross my fingers.

I OPEN the glove compartment and take out the latest version of the paper. I skim it quickly, then go back through some of the more problematic passages with the yellow highlighter, before adding more detailed notes in the margin. My initial optimism quickly turns to dismay. Why in hell have they opened up this whole other can of worms? I squint at an entire new section of the paper, hardly believing my eyes.

Sparrowhawks? Robot sparrowhawks? And pages of graphs and histograms and paragraphs of analysis, all springing from work which was not even foreshadowed in the original paper?

What are they thinking?

I'm furious at this. Furious with the journal editor, for not spotting this late addition before it was forwarded to me. Furious with the authors, for adding to our mutual workload. Furious for their presumption, that I will presumably be sufficiently distracted by this to overlook the existing flaws – like a magpie distracted by something shiny? (Except that's a myth; corvids are not attracted to shiny things at all.)

Furious above all else that they are prepared to squander this good and original science, to slip it into this paper like a lazy afterthought, as a kind of intellectual bribe.

No, this must not stand.

I put the 4WD back into gear. I must settle my thoughts before firing back an intemperate response. But really, I'm enraged. They think they know who I am, I'm sure. I imagine encountering them out here, running them down, feeling the bounce of my wheels over their bodies. I'd stop the 4WD, get out, walk slowly back. Savour the squelch of my boots on the marshy ground.

Their whimpering, their broken-boned pleas.

"You think this is how we do science, do you?" I'd ask them, entirely rhetorically. "You think it is a kind of game, a kind of bluff? Well, the joke's on you. I'm recommending your paper be rejected."

And then I would walk away, ignoring their noises, get back into the 4WD, drive off. At night their cries would still come in across the marsh. I wouldn't let myself be troubled by that. They brought this on themselves, after all.

But that sparrowhawk, I'll admit, *was* beautiful.

I GO out to the walk-in traps and collect the overnight haul. There are almost always some birds in the snares, and almost always some starlings. It is how we ring them, bring them in for study, assess their overall genetic fitness. Generally they are none the worse for having been caught up in the nets overnight.

I collect ten adult specimens, let the others go, and take the ten back to the hut.

A firm in Germany has made the digital polarising masks for us. They are elegant little contraptions, similar in design to the hoods fitted around captive birds of prey. These are smaller, though, optimised to be worn by starlings, and

to offer no significant resistance to normal flight. Each hood is actually a marvel of miniature electronic engineering. Bulging out from either side are two glassy hemispheres.

In its neutral mode, the bird has an unrestricted view of its surroundings. Each hemisphere, though, is divided into digitally-controlled facets. These can be selectively darkened via wireless computer signals, effectively blocking out an area of the starling's vision.

The consequence of this – the point of the masks – is that we can control the birds' collision-avoidance response remotely. By making a given bird think it is about to be struck by another bird, we can cause it to fly in any direction we choose.

Again, it is asking too much of human reflexes to control a bird at such a level. But the computers can do it elegantly and repeatably. Each of our ten hooded starlings then becomes a remote-controlled agent, under our direct operation. Like the robot sparrowhawk, we can steer our agents into the murmuration. The distinction is that the hooded starlings do not trigger a threat response from their seven neighbours; they are absorbed into the whole, accepted and assimilated.

But they *can* influence the other birds. And by careful control of our hooded agents, we can initiate global changes in the entire murmuration. We can instigate domains, break them up, make them coalesce. Anything that happens under the influence of natural factors, we can now bring about at our will.

By we, of course, I mean I.

Old habits die hard. Science is always done in the 'we', even when the work is borne on a single pair of shoulders. But frankly, I am starting to doubt the commitment of my fellow researchers. There is always a division of labour in any collaborative enterprise, and sometimes that division can seem unfair. If the brunt of the work is my responsibility, though, I fail to see why I should not receive the lion's share of the credit.

As I wait for the murmuration to form, I make some deft amendments to the list of the authors, striking out a name here, a name there.

Feathers will fly, of course.

TEN BIRDS might not seem much but these birds are like precision instruments, guided with digital finesse. To begin with, we – I – restrict myself to only minor interventions.

I make the murmuration split into two distinct elements, then recombine.

Suitably encouraged, I quarter it like a flag. I pull it apart into four rippling sheets of birds, with arcs of clear air between them. The edges are improbably straight, as if the birds are glassed-in, boxed by invisible planes. But that is the power of incredibly delicate control processes, of stimulus and feedback operations happening much too swiftly for human perception. If an edge starts losing coherence, the computer makes a tiny adjustment to one or more of the control starlings and the order is reestablished. This happens many times a second, at the speed of avian reactions.

They have always lived in a faster world than us. They live a hundred days in one of our hours. To them we are slow, lumbering, ogrelike beings, pinned to the ground by the stonelike mass of our bodies. We envy them; they pity us.

I push forward. I carve geometries out of the murmuration. I fold it into a torus, then a ribbon, then a Moebius strip. I do not need to know how to make these shapes, only to instruct the laptop in my desires. It works out the rest, and becomes more adept as it goes along.

I make the murmuration spell out letters, then I coax those letters into lumpy, smeared-out words. I spell my name in birds. They banner around me like the slogans towed by light aircraft. I laugh even as I feel that I have crossed some line, some invisible threshold between pristine science and sordid exploitation.

But I carry on anyway. I am starting to think about those domains, those hints of modular organisation.

How far could I push this, if I were so determined?

ANGRY EXCHANGES of emails. Editor not happy with this latest change of direction. Much to-ing and fro-ing. Questions over the change in the listed authors – deemed most unorthodox. Accusations of unprofessionalism. If we were in a room together, the three of us, we might get

somewhere. Or we might end up throwing textbooks.

Is this a travesty of the way science ought to be done, or is it science at its shining best – as loaded with passion and conviction as any other human enterprise? No one would doubt that poets squabble, that a work of great literature might take some toll on its creator, that art forges enemies as readily as allies. Why do we hold science to a colder, more emotionless set of standards? If we care at all about the truth, should we not celebrate this anger, this clashing of viewpoints?

It means that something vital is at stake.

Hard in the spitting crucible of all this to remember that every one of us was drawn to this discipline because of a love of birds.

But that is science.

MY PROPOSITION is simple. The domains are controllable. I can cause them to form, contain the shape and extent of their boundaries, determine the interaction of their vector groups with the surrounding elements. I can move the domains around with the flock. I can blend one domain into another, merging them like a pair of colliding galaxies. Depending on their vector properties, I can choose whether that act results in the destruction of both domains or the formation of a larger one.

I sense the possibility of being able to execute a kind of Boolean algebra.

If the domains behave in a controllable and repeatable way, and I can determine their states – their aggregate vector sums – then I can treat them as inputs in a series of logic operations.

The thought thrills me. I cannot wait for the coming of dusk.

With the laptop reprogrammed, I quickly satisfy myself that the elements of my Boolean experiment are indeed workable. I create the simplest class of logic gate, an AND gate. I classify the input domain states as either being 0 or 1, and after some trials I achieve a reliable 'truth table' of outputs, with my gate only spitting out a '1' if the two inputs share that value.

I push on. I create OR and NOT gates, a 'not AND' or NAND gate, a NOR gate, an XOR and XNOR gate. Each is trickier than the last, each requires defter control of the domains and vector states. To make things easier – at the burden of a high computational load on the computer and the ethernet network – I retrieve more birds from the snares, fitting them with additional digital hoods.

Now I can create finer domains, stringing them together like the modules in an electrical circuit.

I begin to 'wire up' the flock. I assign gates to perform logical operations, but also to store data. Again, I need only tell the laptop what I want it to do – it takes care of the computational heavy-lifting. All I know is what my eyes tell me. The murmuration has grown knotted and clotted, dense with domain boundaries and threaded with the thick synapses of internal data corridors. It swoops and billows over me, a circuit board of birds.

The astonishing thing is that on the level of individual starlings, they sense no strangeness – no inkling that they are participating in anything but a normal murmuration. The complexity is emergent, operating on a scale that the birds simply cannot sense, cannot share. They are cells in a larger organism.

I lash together a Perl script, a simple text to logic program on the laptop, enabling me to send natural language queries to the flock.

IS ONE AND ONE TWO?

There is a process of calculation. The circuit shuffles. I glean the flow of information along its processing channels – the physical movement of birds and their larger domain boundaries.

The answer returns. The laptop takes the Boolean configuration and converts it back into natural language.

>>YES.

I try another query.

IS ONE AND ZERO ZERO?

A swoop, a billow, a constant busy shuffling of birds.

>>NO.

I smile. Maybe a fluke.

IS ONE AND ZERO ONE?

>>YES.

I am elated.

Over the next thirty minutes, I run through question after question. The birds answer unfail-

ingly. They are computing, and doing so with the utmost machinelike reliability.

>>YES YES NO YES YES NO NO NO.

I am doing algebra with starlings.

But as the gloom gathers, as the dusk deepens, something troubles me.

In all my interventions to date, one thing has remained true. The murmuration eventually dissipates. The roosting instinct overpowers the flocking instinct, and the birds cascade down into the trees. It happens very quickly, a kind of runaway escalation. Whenever I have witnessed it, I am always saddened, for it is the end of the show, but I am also awed by what is another demonstration of marvellous collective action.

And then the skies are clear again, until the birds lift at dawn. This is what should happen.

But now the murmuration will not break up.

Some birds leave it, maybe a third, but a core remains. I hammer at the laptop – more puzzled than worried at first. I try to disrupt the logic flow, randomise the data, dismantle the knotty Boolean architecture. But the pattern remains obstinately present. The sky darkens, until only the cameras and rangefinders are able to track the birds, and then with difficulty.

But I can still hear them up there – a warm but unseen presence, like a halo of dark matter hovering over me.

I THINK it's time to recuse myself from refereeing this paper.

After all the time and work I've invested in the process, it's hardly a decision I take lightly. But there is a difference between acting as a gatekeeper and a psychiatrist. I'm afraid that recent developments have given me cause for concern.

We all work under some degree of stress. Science is not a carefree playground. It's an arena where reputations crash as readily as they soar. Commit some error of analysis, read too much into noise, claim a premature discovery, and you may as well tie your own academic noose. Forget those keynote lectures. Forget those expenses-paid conference invitations. You'll be tarnished – dead in the water.

I've felt the pressure myself. I know what solitude and overwork can do to your objectivity. All the same, there are limits. I should have sensed that things were not going well long before they reached this latest development.

I explain to the journal editor that I'm no longer in a position to offer a balanced opinion on the worth of this work. Frankly, I'm not even sure it still qualifies as science.

I'm stuffing the paper back into the glove compartment when it meets some obstruction, some object lodged at the back. I push my fingers into the mess and meet a stiff, sharp-edged rectangle about the size of a credit card.

For a moment there's a tingle of recognition.

I pull out the offending object, study it under the 4WD's dome light. It's a piece of grey foil printed with the name and logo of a pharmaceutical company. The foil contains six blisters. All but one of the blisters have been popped and emptied of their contents.

The sixth still holds a small yellow pill.

I wonder what it does?

I SLEEP badly, but dare to hope that the murmuration will have gone by morning – broken up or drifted away elsewhere. But when I wake, I find it still present.

If anything, it has grown. I run a number count and find that it has been absorbing birds, sucking them into itself. More than half a million now. Enslaved to the murmuration, the individual birds will eventually exhaust themselves and drop out of the sky. But the whole does not care, any more than I concern myself with the loss of a few skin cells. As long as there are fresh starlings to be fed into the machine, it will persist.

I drive the 4WD out again, set up the laptop, try increasingly desperate and random measures to make the pattern terminate itself.

Nothing works.

But the supply of new birds is not inexhaustible. Sooner or later, if they keep coming, it will churn its way through all the starlings in the country. Long before that happens, though, the wrongness of this thing will have become known to others beside myself. They will know that I had something to do with it. They will admire me at first, for my cleverness. After that, they will start blaming me.

I want it to end. Here. Now.

So.

Desperate measures. The wind is stiff today, the bushes and trees buckling over. Even the birds struggle to hold their formation, although the will of the murmuration forces itself through.

I make it move. I can still do that.

I steer the murmuration in the direction of the wind turbine. The blades swoop around at the limit of their speed: if it were any windier, the automatic brakes would lock the turbine into immobility. The edge of the flock begins to enter the meat slicer. I hear its helicopter whoosh, the cyclic chop of its great rotors. The blades knock the birds out of the sky in their hundreds, an instant bludgeoning execution. They tumble out of formation, dead before they hit the ground.

This is merciful, I tell myself. Better than being trapped in the murmuration.

But my control slackens. The domains are resisting, slipping out of my grip. The ensemble won't allow itself to be destroyed by the wind turbine.

It knows what I have tried to do.

It knows that I am trying to murder it.

On my laptop the Perl script says:

>>NO. NO. NO.

THE PILL leaves a bitter but familiar aftertaste. With a clarity of mind I haven't known – or don't remember knowing – in quite some time, I make my way once more to the top of the turbine tower. It's odd that I feel this compulsion, since my fear of heights hasn't abated, and for once there's nothing wrong with the turbine, beyond some fresh dark smears on the still-turning blades.

In the housing, I ease around the humming core of the generator and its whirring shaft. The dials are all still registering power – enough for my needs, at any rate. We're still down to those last few replacement fuses, but there's no need to swap one of them at the moment.

I climb the little ladder and poke my head out through the roof hatch.

Steeling myself, pushing my fear aside, I put my elbows on the rim and lever my body up through the hatch. Finally I'm sitting on the rim, with my legs and feet still dangling back into the housing. The wind is hard and cold up here, a relentless solid force, but with the enclosing handrails there's no real chance of me falling. All the same, it takes my last reserves of determination to rise from the hatch, pushing myself up until I am standing on the rubberised decking. The handrails seem too low now, and the gaps between the uprights too widely spaced. With each swoop of the blades, the housing moves under me. My knees wobble. My stomach flutters and sweat pools in the palms of my gloved hands.

But I will not fall. That's not why I've come to the top of the turbine.

Once more I survey my little world from this lofty vantage. The hut, the instruments, the parked vehicle. The low sky. The boggy tracks of my daily routine.

The harder gleam of the causeway, arrowing away.

But it never gets anywhere. The causeway vanishes into bog and then the bog opens up into the silver mirror of a larger expanse of open water. I squint, trying to pick up the causeway's continuation beyond the flooded area. There, maybe. A scratch of iron-grey, arrowing on toward the horizon. But dark shapes bordering that scratch. Cars, vans – all stopped. Some of them tipped over or emptied like skulls. Burnt out.

I might be imagining it.

Beyond the marsh, beyond the enclosing water, nothing that hints at civilisation. The telegraph poles run some distance, then sag into the water – their lines cut or submerged.

I realise now that I've been here a lot longer than weeks. I know also that I don't need to worry about being a scientist any more. That's the least of anyone's concerns. Being a scientist is just something I used to do, a long time ago.

I wish I could hold onto this. I wish I could remember that the paper doesn't matter, that the journal doesn't matter, that nothing matters. That the only thing left to worry about is holding on, keeping things at bay. But unless I'm mistaken that was the last of my medication.

Finally the wind and the swaying overcome my will. I start down the tower, back to the ground.

At the 4WD I stand and watch the birds. That clarity hasn't completely left me, that knowledge of what I am and what has become of me. I can feel it leaking out of my head as if there are drainage holes in the base of my skull. For the

moment, though, there's still enough of it there. I know what happened.

But the murmuration still contains troubling structure – sharp edges, block knots of density, shifting domains and restless connections. Symmetries and geometries. Did I cause all of that to come into being, or is this now the way of things? Is it a kind of equivalence, order emerging in the natural world, while order is eclipsed in ours? Have I been trying to communicate with the murmuration, or is it the other way around? Which of us is the observer, which the phenomenon?

If I tried to kill it, will it find it in itself to forgive me?

I try to hold onto these questions. They seem hugely important to me now. But one pill was never going to hold the dusk at bay.

IN THE morning I feel much better about things now. Finally, I think I can see a way through – a fresh approach, a new chance of publication. It will mean going back to the start of the process, but sometimes you have no choice – you just have to cut your losses.

I draft a letter to the editor. Although it pains me to do it, I feel that we have no option but to request a new referee. Things have gone on long enough with this old one. Frankly the whole exchange was in danger of getting too personal. We all know that the anonymous part counts for very little these days, and in all honesty professional feelings were starting to get in the way. I had a suspicion about their identity, and of course mine was all too visible to them. We had history. Too much bad blood, too much accumulated recrimination and mistrust. At least this way we will be off to a clean start again.

I read it over, make a few alterations, then send the letter. It might be misplaced optimism, but this time I am quietly confident of success.

I look forward to hearing from the editor.

Alastair Reynolds' first *Interzone* story appeared in 1990, when he was still working on his PhD in astronomy. He went on to work for the European Space Agency in the Netherlands. His novels include *Revelation Space* (2000) and the recent Poseidon's Children trilogy. He now lives in Wales and spends a lot of time watching birds.

"Solid, entertaining but disquieting tales where evil is not an external entity, but an unavoidable component of the human condition, rooted in the depth of the human soul. I cannot recommend this anthology enough: simply, dark fiction at its best"
—Gumshoe—

Christopher Priest • Stephen Volk
Joel Lane • Kristine Kathryn Rusch
Melanie Tem • Tim Lees and others

From the makers of Interzone

American Royal paperback, 240 pages

Buy Crimewave 12 only or subscribe to four volumes for a *significant saving*:
ttapress.com/shop/

Crimewave 13 coming soon

SONGBIRD

FAOZLISHAH JOHANABAS

ILLUSTRATED BY VINCENT

39

The memory surfaces like a half-remembered dream. A song. A lullaby, I think. Someone is singing it to me. I feel warm, as if wrapped in a blanket and embraced by strong, gentle hands. I remember a boy whose eyes are like mine. I remember him holding my hand like it was his lifeline.

I open my eyes a fraction. The song is still there, but it is not a memory. It is not a dream. Large cylinders filled with blue liquid, with bubbles flowing in an upward stream, surround me. I am strapped on a metal chair, and it's cold. In front of me is a…microphone?

I gasp and jerk my body, but I can hardly move. Only when the song stops do I realise that it came from me.

"She's waking up," I hear someone say. Not the gentle voice in my memory/dream, but a harsh one, a man's voice. "We need to purge another dose."

My eyes widen. I discover I can move my head. There are tubes and wires and clutter everywhere. And there are cylinders with different colored liquid.

And then a man stoops in front of me so that his face is at the same level as mine. Middle-aged Chinese, though I can't really tell with the unkempt whiskers and the grime on his face. His breath stinks of stale coffee and cheap cigarettes.

"There, there, *leng lui*," he says. Pretty girl. How do I know that? I don't speak Chinese. "We wouldn't want you lucid, now would we?"

"Who—" I start to say, my voice amplified. The bubbles in the cylinders pulsate. Is the liquid turning darker?

"Shh," the man says. "Happy songs, remember?"

I follow his movements as he takes out a syringe filled with glowing blue liquid and injects it into a transparent plastic tube attached to my arm. I jerk again in protest, but my restraints are much stronger than I am.

It doesn't take long after the injection before I feel the familiar cloud blanketing my consciousness again. I feel happy. I am smiling, I think. I close my eyes and the memory of the lullaby resurfaces.

"That's it," the man says. His voice is much thicker, far away. "Sing."

And I sing.

A FLASH OF lightning that ignites the sky and the thunder that follows it are the only warning before a deluge crashes from the sky. I scamper to the nearest building that can offer a semblance of shelter. I'm not the only one. The exposed skin at the back of my neck is already itching and I have to clench my hands to stop myself from scratching. I learned the hard way years ago that scratching will only break the skin and the acid rain can seep in, making things worse. Much worse. They should have a warning siren or a horn or something.

Maybe they do deliver weather reports via retinal implants. I wouldn't know. I've never been able to afford one of those. I don't think anyone in this part of Kampung Baru can afford a cheap armband computer, much less a retinal implant.

Then again, this is Kuala Lumpur. It rains here almost every day, whenever the sky feels like it. Also, the government is too busy reminding everyone of its past glories to do anything about the present. And getting fatter from tax money and bribes the giant corporations keep feeding them.

Let's not even talk about the future. It's going down a clogged up drain, just like the ones in front of me.

Seeing that I have no choice but to wait the rain out, I study my temporary shelter. It must have been a restaurant once, but a cataract of dust has coated the windows. I close my eyes and imagine people flocking here to get good food and good company. Real food and real company, not synthetic grub from vending machines and holographic representations of people.

The only things left are peeling paint and corroded signboards eaten up by acid rain, and ghosts of small businesses eaten up by taxes.

The red paint that has been streaked across the heavily chained door is barely visible under all that dust. A sign of foreclosure, a common sight in slums like this. They know better than to place an e-sign here. Anything electronic gets ripped off and stolen. Red paint is cheap and easy to recognise.

Just like the red paint splashed across the run-down flat that my foster family used to live in.

I FEEL A slap on my cheek. It stings.

"Hey, hey," says a man. He sounds familiar, like from somewhere in my dreams. Or in between dreams; I'm not sure which. "What are you doing?"

I peel my eyes open. The lids are so heavy.

Another slap. "Hey, *leng lui*. Stop singing."

I groan. My cheek is already burning. It takes a moment before my eyes can focus. I'm in the same room as I was before the haze took over my consciousness. It's still there, at the fringes, waiting to pull me under again. The same six large cylinders are still in a semicircle in front of me, with a microphone in the middle. Something is wrong, though. The bubbles in the cylinders are churning, and the liquid is giving off a faint glow, but it's not blue. More like the grey of a storm cloud.

"Look at what you've done." The man is shouting now. Spittle splashes on my face. "An entire batch, wasted. *Wuyong*. Useless."

He raises his hand to slap me again, and the only thing I can do is clench my teeth, and brace myself. I don't close my eyes. I don't look away.

"Wait," says another voice, softer, calmer. "You don't want to break her face. Not this one."

I tilt my head to see beyond the mouth-breathing man with crazy eyes. An older man with hair as grey as his suit limps toward us. He's either clean-shaven or he doesn't have facial hair in the first place. While the other man stinks of cigarettes, this one reeks of perfume.

The newcomer moves the other man aside with a flick of his hand and lifts my face to inspect me. Up close, the sickly scent is overwhelming. Did he drain an entire bottle?

"A cut lip, and you'll bruise, but no permanent damage," he says. "Wu Kwan, if you had broken her jaw…"

He lets his threat hang, but it is enough to make the bigger man, Wu Kwan, shrink into himself. "Forgive me, Mister Choi."

"Sample what the girl has produced."

Wu Kwan holds a question in his eyes, but he doesn't say anything. Instead, he turns a knob on one of the cylinders and collects the glowing liquid in a vial. He empties the vial in one gulp. I don't know whether to cringe or be impressed. For several minutes or so, nothing happens.

Then he starts shivering. He hugs himself, but the shivering only worsens. And he's looking around everywhere, his eyes wild and unfocused. A single tear escapes its confinement.

"What are you feeling?" Mister Choi asks.

"I'm cold. And I feel lost."

Mister Choi tilts my chin up and gives me a closer inspection. His thin eyebrows are knotted, and the lines on his face deepen, but it's not anger I sense. "Interesting," he says. "Don't throw this batch away. There is a market for it, I'm sure. Assemble a new batch. There's something I want to test."

It occurs to me that I should be screaming right now, or at least calling for help. I'm thinking it, but I also feel…detached. "You've given me something. What is it?"

"Clever girl. Who are you?"

"Arya."

"I'm not interested in your name," Mr Choi says. "Who are you, really?"

I don't answer. A part of me is defying him the only way I can.

Another part of me has been asking the same question my entire life.

"No matter," he says. "Let's see if you can give more interesting results. Wu Kwan, bring me lust."

Wu Kwan is no longer shivering that much. His eyes are focused. He has replaced all six cylinders with new ones that contain clear liquid. He brings a syringe filled with glowing red liquid. I struggle against my restraints even though I know I can't do anything about it. He empties the contents of the syringe into the intravenous tube.

The haze creeps back and envelops me. I don't think I can resist it even if I wanted to.

I start singing again.

THE MAN LIES back, propped up on his elbows as I slither off my tank top. I turn in a slow dance, and pull down my pants with my back facing him. They all love an ass show. When I turn back, in only my bra and panties, he's wearing a smirk.

"You Asians are so beautiful," he says, his voice thicker. He sits up and takes off his shirt. Blond hair covers his chest and abdomen. For someone over forty, he's in great shape. "I bet you don't get many White clients, do you?"

"I get enough," I say. I don't tell him that *Mat Sallehs* usually prefer women – or men – from established agencies that bring in merchandise from China or Vietnam. Not that these *Mat Sallehs* can tell the differences. We're all Asians to them.

I lean forward, knowing he's staring at my cleavage, and I unbuckle his belt.

"You look different from the photos in the listing," he says, caressing my arms with the back of his fingers.

"Better?" I ask.

"Definitely better." He's almost purring his words now.

I pull down his pants and almost gasp. Both his legs, from mid-thigh downward have been replaced by cybernetic ones. Except for the metallic surface with soft blue lights at regular intervals by the sides, the prostheses look exactly like any other muscular legs. I wonder if this is the reason he didn't go through agencies to hire an outcall masseuse. People – especially in this region – are still squeamish about cybernetic prostheses.

"You don't mind?" he says.

"May I?"

"Go for it."

I run my finger down the length of the right leg prosthesis. It's cool to the touch, but not that much different than his body heat. It's also smooth; I can't find any seams or joints or hydraulics.

"Lost my left leg in the Pakistan war back in '28," he says, his voice almost smug. "They gave me an older version of this, but it worked so great I got the other leg amputated and replaced it with a prosthesis."

"So you've been using cybernetic prostheses for five years now? How are they?"

"Pretty *roogus* if you ask me. I can outrun World Games sprinters *and* marathoners. And you should see me jump. My gig pays well enough for me to get the latest upgrades. I can feel you touching me. Touch, pressure, proprioception, I can feel them. I didn't want temperature and pain, because what's the point in those?"

"*Roogus*," I say in sincere awe. "What do you do for a living?"

"Regional head of security for Sime Guthrie."

"Aren't you guys having problems with separatist farmers in the northern states?"

He barks a laugh. "I'm not here to talk shop."

I smile at him. "You're right. Turn over."

"Let me get a boost first," he says. He reaches for his pants at the edge of the bed and takes out two vials filled with glowing red liquid. He tosses one at me and then downs the liquid in one gulp. Within a minute, his eyes become momentarily glazed. "You want to know how much a vial of high-grade lust costs?"

"How much?" I ask. I take a sip, though I pretend to empty the vial.

"More than what I'm paying you," he says.

"We'll see about that."

He snickers as he lies on his stomach and grabs a pillow. For a cheap motel that charges by the hour, they provide a comfortable queen-sized bed and plush pillows. I press the buttons on the remote to activate the electric privacy glass windows and to dim the ceiling.

I yank down his underwear.

"Your God won't mind?" he asks. So he *can* tell which Asian I am.

"God left this country a long time ago. Now wise men come up with their own fatwas. They think they're God. I don't care what a bunch of misguided zealots have to say."

"Let's not waste time, then," he says.

I unclasp my bra and slide my panties down. I pour scented oil on his broad shoulders and watch as it trickles down and collects at the small of his back. I crouch over him, and in a single undulating motion, press my breasts against his buttocks and move upward.

"I can give you a happy ending for an extra charge," I whisper in his ear before nipping his earlobe.

He yelps and groans. From his heavy breathing, I can tell he's already hard.

"IT'S WORKING, MISTER Choi," I hear Wu Kwan say. "Looks like high-grade lust."

The haze is receding, but for the moment, I'm

floating at the fringes of consciousness.

"No," Mister Choi says. "Let it play out. I want to see what she is able to produce. Give her more."

"Won't it be too much?"

"Do it, Wu Kwan."

I can barely make out the large man approaching me with a glowing syringe before I wink out of consciousness again.

THE CRAMPED MOTEL room is awash with the smell of sweat and semen. Three discarded condoms lay on the carpeted floor like dead fish. I'm quite certain one of them is torn. He got rough the second time around, and I'm still sore from it. I'm sure my neck will sport a bruise in the shape of his grip. I shudder. I'm not afraid of getting pregnant; I'll never be able to, that much I know. You'd think, if people can invent fully functional limb prostheses, they'd be able to cure these new strains of venereal diseases.

The best I can do now is hope that he doesn't have one, and get a jab at the community clinic when I get out of here.

I sit on the form-conforming chair (a cheap imitation, judging from the sharp jabs as it moulds itself to fit me) and watch him, as he lies naked on the bed. I can't believe he's still hard even though he's snoring.

I rock myself on the chair and start humming a song, a lullaby from a half-remembered dream. Before I know it, I'm singing the entire song. Not loudly, but enough to rouse him from his sleep.

He sits up and faces me. He's no longer hard, thank the Almighty. His eyes are glazed, though, just like after he downed the liquid drug. Looking at him, I'm not too sure if he's awake or sleepwalking.

"It's a beautiful song," he says, his voice holding a dream-like quality. "You have the voice of an angel."

I don't know how I do it, as I can't do it all the time, but I give another mental thank-you to the Almighty that it works this time. I continue singing while I think of things to ask him.

"What's your full name?" I ask. Lame, I know.

"Darius Edgar Walker."

"What are you doing here, Darius?"

"To quell the uprising of the separatist farmers."

I take a deep breath. "How do you intend to do that?"

And just like that, he gives me the details of his company's plans.

I can't help but shudder as he continues talking. If the plan works, at least ten thousand farmers will not only lose their livelihood, but their lives as well. What's worse, the government is aware of this, but since Sime Guthrie is one of the biggest investors in this country, it will not intervene.

I have to warn them. They only have three days left.

Darius Walker shakes his head. His eyes have regained their focus. "That was something, wasn't it?"

"Three rounds," I say, leaning back in a languid motion. "Not bad for an old *Mat Salleh*."

"Hey," he says, but he's grinning. He looks down at his flaccid penis. "Well, I'm out of juice. How much do I owe you?"

"More than a vial of lust, I hope."

His grin gets broader. He reaches for his wallet and takes out a cash chip that blinks USD500 when he presses it. He tosses it at me. "You definitely earned it. That was *roogus*."

I make a show of putting on my tank top and leather pants. I don't bother putting on my underwear first. I stuff them in my back pocket along with the cash chip.

Outside, storm clouds have gathered. I need to get to the rendezvous point at Kampung Baru before the acid rain falls.

"WHAT'S THIS?" WU Kwan asks. "Why is the liquid ice-blue?"

I shake my head to banish the haze faster. The cylinders flanking the microphone give off an arctic glow. I've never seen anything like this.

"Impressive, isn't it," Mister Choi says. There's a calculated glee in the way the corners of his lips quirk upward. "If only I could crack your head open to read your dreams, my songbird."

Without having to be instructed first, Wu Kwan withdraws a sample and drinks it. This time, his eyes are not glazed. They shine with clarity.

"What do you feel, Wu Kwan?" Mister Choi asks.

"I need to make sure we get these drugs out no matter what. No matter the cost."

Mister Choi's lips quirk higher. "Determination. Oh, the amount of money we'll make selling this batch to the military companies."

"You make emotion drugs?" I ask. "But how?"

"I merely arrange the setup, my songbird. You're the one synthesising the drugs for me."

"How?"

"GABA, serotonin, oxytocin, dopamine, and all other neurotransmitters. They facilitate emotions, among other things. My generation and my father's generation fucked things up when they got addicted to their electronic devices before they even learned to speak. If you scan the brains of your generation, you'll find the amygdala smaller than that of your grandparents'. We no longer process emotions.

"Until these drugs," he continues. "Women like you can activate my synthetic neurotransmitters through your songs. Most can only produce basic emotions like lust and love and happiness. But you," he says, caressing my cheek, "you, my songbird, are something special."

I spit at him. "I'm nobody special. Just let me go."

Mister Choi flicks my spittle off his face. Wu Kwan surges forward and raises his fist to bash my head in, but Mister Choi stops him.

"Such spirit," he says. "If I let you go, who would sing for me, hmm?"

"Let. Me. Go."

"Have you heard of the Songstress gene?" Mister Choi asks, ignoring me. "No? Such a shame. No matter. I want to see what else you can make. Wu Kwan, take a bit of determination and give it to her."

I struggle against my restraint even though it's futile.

I DON'T KNOW how long I've been hiding in this rundown town of Batu Pahat two states south of Kuala Lumpur. It rains all the time, but for the first time since I can remember, I'm not afraid of it. Raindrops cool my skin instead of burning it. Even the trees are healthier here, growing in the cracks of long-abandoned buildings.

The separatists have been insistent on taking me in, but the less I am associated with them, the better it is for them and me. I had wanted the tip to be anonymous, but the idiotic informant leaked my name when their insurgence succeeded.

Stupid, stupid informant. This is why I hate people.

The sun is hidden behind thick clouds, but it still makes its presence known. Despite the rain, I can barely tolerate the heat emanating off the walls and the floor. Sometimes I wish I were in Japan or Pan-America instead of stupid tropical Malaysia.

The scream of sirens breaks the stillness of the town. I peer out the broken window and see three maglev police cars two buildings away. I shrink into the shadows. They can't be here for me. I've been so careful.

A tall man steps out of one of the cars. My heart sinks into my useless uterus.

Darius Edgar Walker.

It's not possible.

But it is.

I hiss out a string of curses in Malay, English, Cantonese *and* Tamil. How could I have been so stupid? My hands shaking, I fish out the almost empty cash chip from my backpack. I throw it away.

It lands with a clang at Darius Walker's feet.

He picks it up. He's wearing the same smirk I remember from that night. "I knew something was off when you looked different from the girl in the escort listing," he says. "I thought it was false advertising."

"What do you want from me?" I say. "A refund? As I recall, you had a great time. Three times, in fact."

He nods. "That I did. The military invasion that the separatists thwarted. Only the CEO and I knew of the plan. She didn't leak the information. Why would she? I didn't spill. Why would I?"

"What does that have to do with me?"

He steps closer. "I didn't intend to pay you that much. But I did. Why did I?"

"Ask you friend," I say, pointedly looking at his crotch.

"I don't know what you did, but you did something to me, didn't you?"

I bolt.

I look back as I run, but Darius Walker just stands at the doorway snickering at me. I run faster.

I run in the alleyway behind the buildings, past excited dogs and harassed cats, past unkempt people in grimy clothes, past the entire world. I keep running until my heart burns, and then I run faster.

Just when I thought I lost him, Darius Walker closes the distance between us with each long stride. His bionic legs. How could I have forgotten? I make a sharp turn and scamper up a fire escape ladder, hoping that the spaces on the roof are so cramped he'll be at a disadvantage.

More homeless people are gathered on the rooftops, but I ignore them all. I weave my way forward, looking for a place to hide.

I reach the edge of the building. The rooftop across the gap seems to offer more hiding spaces. I look back. Darius Walker is pushing his way through a crowd. I take a deep breath and jog back a few steps. I run.

And I jump.

I land in a rolling thud. My right shoulder is on fire. I pick myself up, ready to continue running despite the pain.

Darius Walker soars over me and lands with the ease of a predator in front of me, blocking my escape.

"Now you see why I replaced my good leg with a prosthesis," he says.

Before I can answer, he lunges forward and tasers my side.

My vision flares blue-white before I fall into absolute blackness.

When I come to, I am lying across the back seat of a police car, my hands cuffed together. Darius Walker is in the passenger seat, and a police officer in a navy-blue uniform is driving. I groan but they ignore me. I prop myself up and look out the window.

The Petronas Twin Towers are barely visible beyond ugly skyscrapers with corroded steel and glass walls. We're back in Kuala Lumpur.

The police officer turns on the siren to part the traffic. He should have known better. People have stopped caring about police and ambulance sirens unless they are VIP escorts.

He stops in the seedier part of Chinatown. Torn and forgotten lanterns dangle between buildings that used to have vibrant coats of paints. The colours have long since dulled, and the paints have mostly peeled off. Windows and doors slam shut. So it's not just the Malay slums that hate the police. That's comforting to know.

Darius Walker and the police officer step out of the car. I shout for help when the doors open, but deep down I know no one will come to my aid.

Two men step out of one of the buildings and greet Darius Walker, one limping and the other trailing behind.

One is a large man with unkempt hair and whiskers and grime all over his face, and the other is a slim older man whose hair is as grey as his suit.

THE LIQUID IN the cylinders in front of me glow sickly-green. I am out of breath. I don't know if I was singing or screaming.

"You!" I gasp. "You're working with Darius Walker."

Mister Choi tsks. "That *gwailo* sold you off for five hundred US dollars. If only he knew your true worth."

"Sold me?"

"Did you think emotion drugs are my only revenue, my songbird? Human trafficking is what I do best." He bows with a flourish. "Wu Kwan, don't bother. It's high-grade fear. A tub of this released in drinking water will cause mass panic. Do you know how much money you are already making me, songbird?"

"Arya," I say, my jaw set. "My name is Arya."

"If that is even your name," Mister Choi says. "When the lab exploded, I thought no one survived."

"What are you talking about?"

Mister Choi inspects me closer. "You really don't remember, do you?"

"Remember what?"

Instead of answering, Mister Choi takes out a vial from the inner pocket of his jacket. The content is clear, but somehow glowing. "Purity," he says, holding up the vial for me to see. "The rarest of them all. Only one person managed to produce this, but she's sadly deceased.

"Wu Kwan," he continues. "Take great care storing this batch of fear. The cylinders are worth more than everything we have here. Install a new batch and give this to her."

"Mister Choi, we've given her too much already. The last girl died from an overdose."

"She did not die from an overdose," Mister Choi snaps. "She was weak. A *wuyong* junkie. Now do as you're told."

Inside, I yell at myself to scream, but my body refuses to listen. It's the infusion they're administering. I just know it. It's like they've blunted my emotions other than the synthetic ones they force me to experience. I need to get it off me.

Whatever escape plan I've plotted fades away as the haze returns.

"ARIANA, WE'RE NOT supposed to be out here."

I glare at the little boy who's grasping my hand like it was a lifeline. He glares back at me. He has the same eyes as I do, the same stubborn jaw.

I remember him. I've forgotten him.

How can I have forgotten him?

"Andri," I tell my twin. "Don't be such a baby."

He juts his tongue out at me and I return the gesture. Both of us laugh.

We crawl into the ventilation shaft and I lead the way, pretending I know where we are headed. We like to pretend to be able to escape this boring lab and the endless tests. My throat is raw from singing. We're always singing.

When we hear muffled voices, I signal Andri to quiet down. He's making a ruckus back there. I approach closer.

"Mister Choi," I hear a familiar female voice say. Doctor Danika Pillai. I like her. She teaches us beautiful lullabies. "Please continue your presentation."

I peer down through the grille. A group of grown-ups are in the seminar room where we learn new songs. Those in white I recognise. The scary-looking ones in green are new to me.

Andri squeezes past me.

"Shh," I hiss. Sometimes Andri can be impossible.

"You know about the emotion drugs, gentlemen," Mister Choi says. I've never liked him. He smells funny. "They are synthesised by certain women when they sing. For the past ten years, we've been able to identify the genetic strand that enables them to do it. We call it the Songstress gene."

The men in green laugh. "So you want us to organise a singing competition?"

"We already did that, long ago," Doctor Danika says. "The Americans started it, one competition after another. That's how we were able to gather test subjects from all over the world and identified the Songstress gene. Participating countries have inserted this gene in the babies we grew—"

"You grow babies?" asks one of the men in green.

"Don't act coy, general," Mister Choi says. "We know the military are doing the same."

My ears start to ring. Andri is tugging my sleeve but I can't concentrate on my surroundings. If what Doctor Danika is saying is true, Andri and I don't have parents. I clamp my mouth shut to keep myself from vomiting.

"Only girls can sing?" one of the men says. I don't know which; I can barely concentrate on breathing.

"The boys can, too," Doctor Danika says. "But they don't produce emotion drugs."

"Tell them about the weapons," Mister Choi says.

"What about the weapons?" the general says.

"Nothing," Doctor Danika says in a hurry.

"So if a lot of countries are doing the same thing," says the general, "what makes Malaysia so special?"

"This," Mister Choi says. "No one else has been able to produce this. Purity."

"What does it do?"

"It renders the consumer blank, and he becomes susceptible to any suggestions the Songstress gives," Mister Choi says.

"Mind control?" says the general. "Who produced this…this purity?"

"Test subject zero-zero-five-six-A."

"Ariana," Doctor Danika says. "Her name is Ariana."

"She's only able to control minds through this drug? Can you be certain she cannot do it herself?"

"That—" Doctor Danika says.

"She's done it before," Mister Choi says. "She's special, that little songbird."

The men mutter to one another before standing up. "You have to relinquish her into our custody this instant."

"No, no, no, no," Andri whispers beside me.

"They can't take you away."

Andri launches into a song. Among all of us, he has the best, purest voice. What the grown-ups try to hide from us, but what we've always known, is that while the girls can manipulate emotions, the boys can affect weapons and the people who control them.

We hear gunshots from the seminar room below us. Mister Choi is screaming.

Chaos ensues.

I WAKE UP with a loud gasp, as if I'm drowning. I blink, once, twice, before I regain my bearings. The explosions in the lab twelve years ago still ring in my ears.

Before me, bubbles churn in the six cylinders. The liquid inside is clear, but the glow forces me to avert my gaze.

Mister Choi limps backward, his eyes wide. "No," he says. "It's not possible. I suspected you were one of the girls, but— You! I saw you fall down the ventilation shaft. I saw you die!"

"You asked me who I am, Mister Choi. I remember now. My name is Ariana."

Before anyone can stop me, I sing the first song I learned: the lullaby Doctor Danika Pillai taught me. My voice is amplified by the microphone. The bubbles churn faster, angrier.

The glass cracks, and then breaks.

Shards of broken glass hit all three of us but I ignore the pain. I ignore the blood seeping down the fresh wounds. We are drenched in the activated drug named purity but I ignore it as well.

I keep singing. My voice fills the cramped drug factory.

Both men stop their frantic struggles and stand still. Their eyes are glazed.

I stop singing.

"Wu Kwan," I say. No. I command. "Release me."

Moving in a trance, he does as he is told. My limbs feel stiff, but my right shoulder no longer hurts. They must have set the displaced shoulder when I was unconscious. I pull out the intravenous line and staunch the bleeding. It only takes a few moments for the haze to completely dissipate. I feel everything again: the hurt, the fear, and the pain.

I also feel the hope that comes with the sudden realisation that Andri is out there, somewhere. Doctor Danika survived long enough to lead us to safety, but we were separated. The last time I saw Andri was when our blood-slicked hands lost their grip, and we were carried in opposite directions.

Andri is alive. I can feel it.

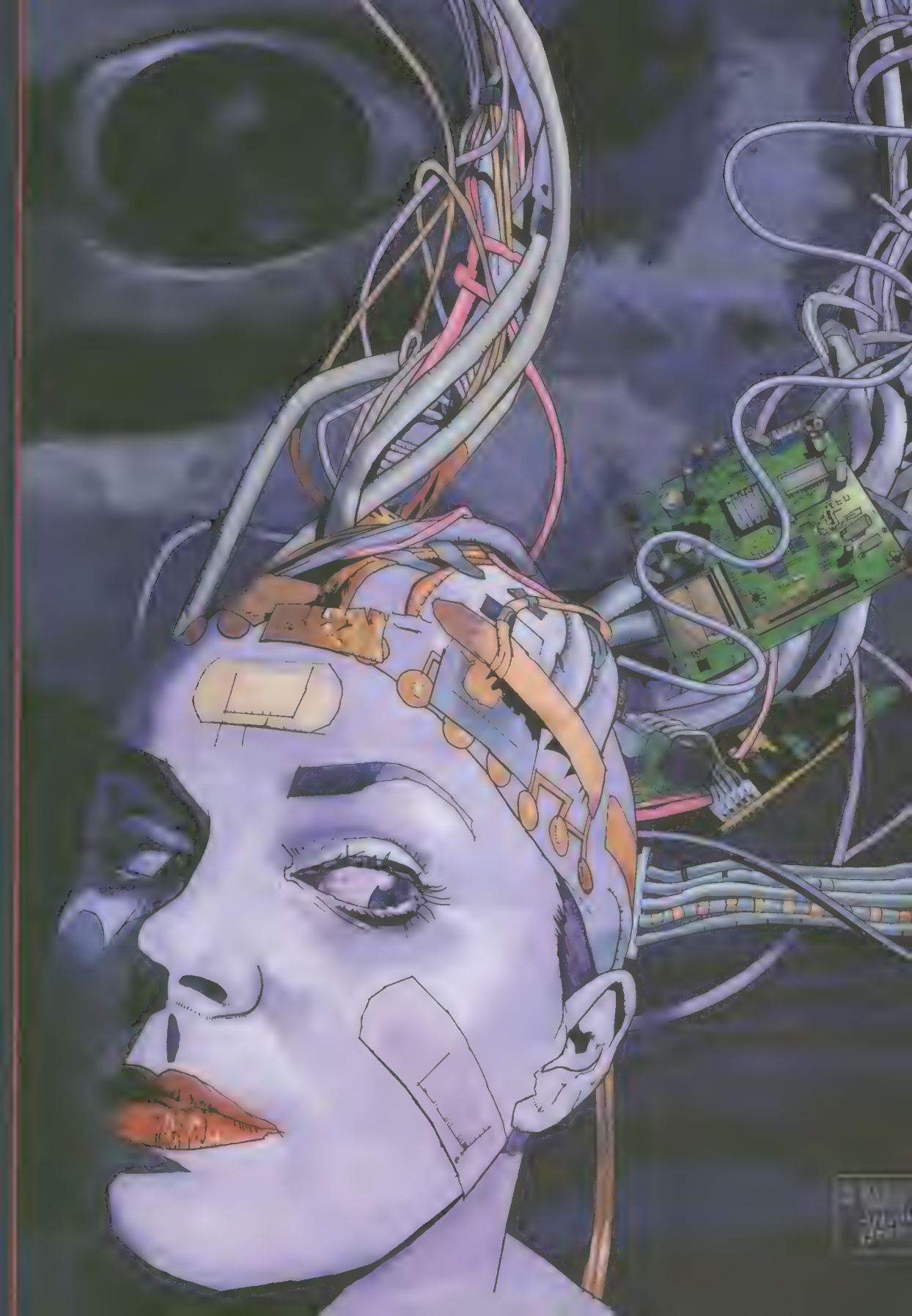
I don't know how Mister Choi survived, but he has since twisted the research into making drugs and human trafficking. I watch him standing in front of me, transfixed. He used to loom over me and Andri, seemingly all-powerful.

Not anymore. Not ever again.

With a resolve that surprises me, I walk past the two entranced men, uttering a single command as I head out.

"Destroy everything here. And kill each other."

For Fadzlishah 'Fadz' Johanabas, finding that ecotone where his personae as a doctor and as a writer collide has always been a challenge. It is from the ecotone that his medical-based stories are born, stories like 'Songbird'. Fadz tweets as @Fadz_Johanabas, and his published stories are listed on his blog at www.fadzjohanabas.com. He has a collection of stories coming out this year from Simptomatik Press.



ILLUSTRATED BY WARWICK FRASER-COOMBE

RICH LARSON — BRAINWHALES ARE STONERS, TOO

Me and Theo are pretty ripped when we decide to save the brainwhales. Well, Theo is. I only took one good hoot, because after a year of dealing basement dro I don't really like the stuff anymore. Plus I know if I smoke up too hard I get sad or boring, and I don't want to be sad or boring when Theo Vandermeer, finnest and richest boy at Polytechnic, is spilled back on my bed with his shirt riding up so I can see that little groove where muscle carves to hip.

"Those grungy smallcorp computation facs shouldn't even exist," Theo says, batting like a cat at a scarf that drapes down from one of the hooks in my unfinished ceiling. His gorgeous green eyes are serious and bloodshot. "Saw this doc about how most of them totally ignore, uh, sanitation requirements. Ultra-cramped quarters. Keeping the beasties in memebrane, it's inhumane, you know? Why don't they, you know, rent out a swimming pool, at least?"

I'm more zeroed in on his shoulders, which are bigger since he started going to some swanky gravity gym up past our high school, but I nod solemnly. "Um. Yeah, it's fucked up." Finished cleaning out the bong, I set it on the cracked vanity and wriggle down onto the bed beside him, accidentally-on-purpose tangling my legs, shaved in the sink in record time after he called, into his. I'm full aware this is my best or only chance with him. He's bent to head off to uni next year, and me, well, I'm a year younger and no prospects for uni in any case.

Theo looks at my legs, hopefully not noticing the nicked ankle. He gives this kind of smirk he does, which drives me kind of wild, then his glassy eyes narrow up. "Your ma works at one of them, doesn't she? ThinkTank or something?"

"She does security there, yeah," I admit, bristling a bit even though I'm close enough to smell Theo's swanky Weber cologne which may or may not have some major 'mones in it. "Has to keep the electric on somehow, don't she?" Saying it gives me a guilty little twist in my stomach, thinking of her sleeping all bone-tired upstairs, since she'd have to work less shifts if I cut her into the grassflow.

Theo gives me this dopey look, and I suspect he might not even be, like, aware that the electric goes off if the bills don't get paid. He's still fin as all hell though, and sweetly sensitive about brainwhale welfare, so I steel my nerves, slide up closer, and kiss him. He tastes mostly like the bong.

When I open my eyes, he's frowning. "Bea. What are you doing?"

I freeze up like ice-buckets, ready to beg him to forget I did it, ready to lie about how ripped I am because I sell him really good dro, remember, real topping swank shit. I can already feel that whine in the back of my throat.

I'm so fucking null. Null of me to put on a clean bra, null of me to say I'd smoke up with him, null of me to have a tiny shitty room and a bony ass and odd knobby nipples.

Then he kisses me back proper, warm swirly tongue and all, and when we come up he's got that smirk again. "Your ma has a fob key to get into the comp-fac, right?"

"Um. Yeah." My head's still a bit spinny. Maybe the cologne does have 'mones. Maybe he's just that good a kisser. "Why?"

Theo tiptoes his fingers along my goose-bumped leg. "The reason people aren't all up in arms about this shit is that they don't *know* about this shit." He gives a triumphant, bleary grin. "To really understand the, you know, the plight? Of the brainwhales? People have to see it. I mean, fuck, I've never seen it, you know?"

I'm not so null I can't see where this is going, but right now I'd probably rob a bank with his handsome ass. "Never seen it either," I admit. My ma never mentions the brainwhale.

"Fuck it." Theo vaults up off the bed, making the 3D-printed frame wobble dangerously, and smooths his hair. I wonder how long my sheets will smell like Vandermeer. I wouldn't mind at least a few days of it. "Let's bust in," he says. "Make a doc of our own. It'll be an adventure, you know?"

An adventure. Something he couldn't do with Ivy Ibsen or the rest of the litter of designer-wearing bleached-blonde bitches he usually hangs around. Something he could only ever do with me, something where we'd keep it a secret but smile sort of sly to each other in the hall, even if he was heading to a rugby practice and I was heading to roll ciggies in the parking lot. Maybe even something he remembers when he heads off to uni and I stay stuck in this shit neighborhood all my life.

"Yeah," I say, like it's a typical Thursday night kind of thing. "Sure."

Theo's grin stretches wider. "And we'll grab some pupusas on the way. Like, a lot of them."

THINKTANK IS A RETOOLED WAREHOUSE OVER EAST-side, near the stadiums. In Theo's Numi, which he flicks to autodrive so we can better focus on

the greasy Memos take-out, it only takes about fifteen minutes to get there. I was sort of hoping he'd lose focus feasting and want to just park somewhere, and then make out, but he's determined in a way that makes me think this isn't just a whim thing, like he's thought about it for a while, and that makes me more nervous, not less.

"Of course, the real problem is the system," Theo says, half a block off ThinkTank.

"Turn in here," I say. "There's an alley around the back."

Theo gives me an approving nod, like he was actually going to park right in front of the fucking place if I hadn't suggested otherwise. He did nearly pull into my driveway the first time he came over to buy.

We park and open the doors on a warm muggy night. I accidentally dislodge a few wrappers and an empty protein bottle, which I pick up and toss back in. I've had a few dinky little fantasies about being in Theo's car with him, usually with us driving to an old-fashioned Italian restaurant, or a beach, or something null like that, but none of them featured the ankle-deep trash.

I've got my ma's fob, jet black, thumb-sized, clenched in my fist. She always hangs it on the side of the microwave. I know I'm about to do a Bad Thing, and my ma will be stormy mad if she finds out, but she's been with the security co long enough they wouldn't dare drop her. And teenagers are supposed to do idiot shit, aren't they, to give old people proof that society's going to shit and all that?

And this one's for a good cause. Brainwhales and making out with Theo Vandermeer, whose hair gel is glistening in the streetlamp light.

"Let's do this," he says, clipping a little hi-fi camera mod to his phone. "Bea, you ready?"

"Ready," I say, feeling a little thrill, a little sizzle up my spine like when I snuck out my window well for the first time. It's the Bad Thing feeling, and it's a good one.

We creep to the door, even though the streets are dead empty, and I push the fob up against the lock until it blinks blue and clicks open. Theo holds the door for me, which is kind of gallant of him. I swing my hand back to brush against his, like, in case he wants to grab it as we plunge into this idiot adventure, but he's busy putting a torch app onto his phone.

It's dark inside except for a little blinking red light, which starts beeping right around the time I figure it's a motion sensor. "Ah, shit," I say. "Theo, we sort of forgot about the alarm?"

"Got it," he grunts. He slides the bright white phone light up and down the walls until he uncovers the alarm box, then yanks the cover down and punches in a string of digits. The beeping quits. Theo closes the alarm box and gives it a little pat. I knew he was more than a pretty face.

"How'd you do that?" I ask, not having to fake the impressedness.

"Vanguard alarms come with a factory preset," he says. "Like, ninety percent of people don't bother changing it."

"Wick."

"Isn't it, yeah?" Theo jerks his head toward the interior, and we follow his bobbing phone light through cubicles and across stained carpet. There's a briny yeasty smell all through the place that someone tried to hide with mango-scented air freshener. Not the best olfactory combo.

The smell gets stronger when we come up on the sealed door marked COMPUTATION in big black stencil. I stick the fob out again. The lock click-clunks.

"This is it," Theo whispers, waving his phone up in my face, ensuring I look both pasty and squinty as fuck. "Do you have anything, like, inspirational to say?"

"Eh." I push his arm down, then kind of hold onto it. "Brainwhales are people, too? You're bent to blur our faces out of that, right?"

"Why?" he asks, looking at his screen. "We look good. Sly."

"I guess."

His hand slips into mine and gives it a squeeze, that smirk coming back again. Then he pushes the door open and we're inside. The humidity ticks up, like, instantly, and there's something big in the room with us, taking up the dark.

And breathing. Or at least, trying. The sound is wet and thick and scraping and makes my stomach churn. I get the thought that maybe ma's never talked about the brainwhale because it's not something she likes to think about at night, then Theo finds the lights and the fluor-

escents bloom on.

It's enormous and horrible and I instantly want those lights back off. The brainwhale's big as a bus, propped half-rolled-over in a black metal cradle flanked with banks of electronics. Its whole body is slimed with the orange gritty memebrane all slick and gleaming in the hard light. Worst is the cables, though, getting into it on all sides, hanging in thick viny bunches from the ceiling or snaking up from underneath.

There's thick clear tubes forced down the breathing hole, the blowhole, I mean, and then copper conductor wires, like the bare one on my wall, are sunk into its skin, mostly into its big bulb of a head. The eye facing us is sunk back in its skull, like it doesn't want to see what's been done with the rest of the body.

I feel this real deliberate kind of gut sick, like when you've drunk too much and you face the toilet knowing you've got to throw it up, because you'll feel so much better after, and maybe someone's even there patting your shoulder, but the vomit just sits there in the bottom of you and doesn't come.

I look over to Theo, bent to see if he's feeling the same way, but he's already skipping along the length of the brainwhale with his phone waving and the biggest most shit-eating grin on his face.

"Bea," he says. "This is *it*, Bea. This is reality, you know? People are going to love this shit."

"This is fucking horrid," I say.

He turns, still grinning. "Yeah. Think of the hits." He comes back to where I'm frozen and points to the pincushion head. "Sperm whale, here, thinking female from the lack of big floppy cock. They've got the biggest brains in the animal kingdom. Five times ours." He deepens his voice for voice-over. "First we harpooned them for our oil light bulbs, now we enslave their gray matter for our data processing. Where does the extortion end?"

"I don't like this," I say, grabbing his arm. "We should go."

Maybe if Ivy Ibsen or some other pouty pretty girl had given him the scared eyes, he would have reconsidered. But I'm just his dealer, and I never learned to bat my fucking lashes without looking like I detached a retina, and my feet are rooted to the spot anyways.

Theo just plucks a dangling cable from the thicket. "Look, here's the input." He holds it up, showing the little webby cap of electrodes at the end. "Think the beastie's awake?"

"Theo, you've got your footy," I say, still staring at the brainwhale's sunken eye. "Let's go."

"We can go." He gets a hard glint in his eye. "If you put this thing on. Just for a second. I'll film."

"It's probably not, you know, calibrated or whatever."

"Why not do it, then?"

"Why don't you do it, and I film."

"Not supposed to have hair gel in when you put electrodes on."

I want to say, I don't think you're meant to have hair, either, but instead I yank the cap from his hands, kind of trembling, and turn it over. "Just for a second," I say. "And when nothing happens, we split, yeah?"

Theo nods from behind his phone. "And here's my beautiful assistant Bea, about to demonstrate how the, uh, input thing works. Maybe she'll be able to communicate with the distressed whale."

I make a face, but I do like, way too much, that he said beautiful. Null of me. I know. I rake my hair back and settle the cap on. It grabs my scalp like a squid, making me shudder. There's an odd static tingle, and I think my vision wobbles for a second, but then nothing. I put my hands on my hips and give Theo a shrug. I'm almost disappointed myself.

In the slice of quiet between the brainwhale's raspy breath out and raspy breath in, we hear the security guards' voices simultaneously.

"Shit!" I hiss. "Turn the light off!"

Theo scrambles over and flips the light switch, and I'm still trying to extricate myself from the cap when he comes back and rolls himself under the nearest bank of equipment. "Come on, Bea," he says, giggling a bit. "Hide."

"Fucking thing won't…" I give up and haul myself under the bank with him, tugging the cable with me. We huddle there flat on our stomachs, knees and elbows touching, and even though ninety percent of me is thinking about getting caught, ten is thinking about how smooth Theo's skin is, like he must moisturize the shit out of it.

We give each other terse grins as the door opens up and the lights come back on. "Entry

clocked at 1:28," says a voice. "Then the alarm got an incorrect code at 1:29."

"Some junkie pickpocket lifted her fob, I bet," says another voice. "Come on out, you little fuck. You can't resell memebrane. It biodegrades."

I look across at Theo, who looks embarrassed. He mouths something about Vanguard alarms, but I don't catch it, because right then the electrodes on my head start to buzz.

Needclean.

It just sort of pops in my head with a little burst of smell and sight and all them others, and then it's gone again. I can feel my face twitching. Theo's brows knit together. I swallow and try to give him a "I'm fine" look as the guards' footsteps get closer. One of them is limping. I think my ma mentioned him, some angry old Pakistan vet, Charlie something, who would be ultra-unamused by our teenage antics.

Yourside underflipper needclean.

The security guards walk right on by us, toward the storage at the back, debating how long it actually takes memebrane to break down. Theo jerks his head at me, like, time to bust, and I'd agree with him except for I can't fucking move. The twitching's spread, and now my limbs are all locked up on me. I get a cold little spike of fear, wondering if I'm having a stroke.

Theo tries dragging me out at first, but when it becomes apparent that I'm dead weight he fishes his dro money plus an extra tenner out of his back pocket and tucks the bills into my front one. I can only stare at him, unbelieving. He gives an apologetic smile I want to bash in, then levers out from under the bank and hurries away.

Or tries to: I hear him bang into the doorframe on the way out and swear at it. The guards coming back from the storage room must hear it too, because they shout and take off after him. Dockers slam the concrete, the door clangs, then it's just me and the brainwhale.

I try screaming, at Theo for being a piece of human shit, at me for being null enough to like him, and at a few other things, but my throat is totally frozen.

Angrysing goodfeel. Nowyou underflipper needclean.

I'm so stormy mad and scared it takes a few seconds for me to be surprised a brainwhale is talking to me. There's pins and needles all through my body, even in my bones. I'm almost hoping the security guards find me and pull me out; better that than brain damage.

I try thinking back at the brainwhale, like, I'd love to scratch your itchy flipper, but I can't fucking move.

Nomotion?

It comes sort of unfinished, feeling like a question, so I answer it like one: Nope, not a bit of motion.

Nomotion! Shocksad shocksad shocksad.

The repetition's got an exaggerated rhythm to it, and I realize, in a big old dash of clarity, that the brainwhale's being a smartass. I guess she knows all about nomotion, what with being stuck in place like that. I want to ask her how to disconnect, but then I start wondering how long she's been in ThinkTank, and she picks that up instead.

3year 4month 23day 15hour 39minute 12second.

And I think, holy shit. That's a long-ass time to be flipped on your side with wires all up in you.

3year 4month 23day 15hour 39minute 18second.

I wonder if she misses the ocean, and this time I get a low vibrato in my head that I think might be a laugh, and with it there's a flash of dull rust-colored water and a dead tarry beach.

ThinkTank somefucked oceansea allfucked.

Fair enough, I think. Must be shitty doing maths all day instead of swimming, though.

Swimdrug alltime numbertime.

I get a flash of the tubes in her head. They make her feel like she's swimming during computations, I guess? At least the bastards do that much. I tell her, think her, how I do my own kind of swimdrug sometimes, when I remember I've lived in the same shit town for 16year and it makes me want to angrysing.

Swimdrug nowgood laterbad. Nopodfeel. Lonefeel.

This time I'm the one who wants to laugh, because that's it exactly, isn't it? Brainwhales are stoners, too. Who knew. In real time I imagine I can hear footsteps again, but her next thought distracts me.

Gonepod. Goneson.

There's a flash of a big gray sperm whale carving through the water, with little squid tentacles

trailing out of its mouth, and I get this odd achy feel like I really, really miss it. Miss him.

Goneson otherThinkTank.

I try remembering if there's other ThinkTank comp-facs in the city, but of course she might just mean any comp-fac. It's awful shitty of them to split up a ma and her kid, or calf, or whatever.

Goyou otherThinkTank. Sonsing.

I can feel this big surge of excitement from her, and before I can ask what she means, my head swells up with this long string of clicking, chittering vibration. I can't pick out words like usual, but the feeling is strong enough to make my breath catch.

The message swirls around inside my skull, looping in on itself. I lie there shuddering, getting the feeling back in my limbs, as voice and footsteps get closer. The message stays. I don't know how long it'll take me to find her son, or if he's even in the city at all, or how I'll get in to see him, but I know it's a hell of a lot more important than anything Theo's going to do at uni.

By the time Charlie the security guard pulls me out from under the equipment bank, I'm fully disconnected.

"Fuck," he says. "Beatrice, isn't it? You still in there, Beatrice?"

I tiptoe my tongue over my teeth, work my jaw a bit. "Yeah," I say. "I'm good."

"Good," he says. "Because you're in a whole lot of shit."

But he seems relieved my brain's not fried, even if it is still buzzing and clicking on the inside, and before he drags me out I manage to point out the sores under the brainwhale's myside flipper.

OUTSIDE, THEO'S LEANING BACK AGAINST THE SECURITY van like he's posing for a photo shoot, chatting at the other guard. When he sees me he sweeps in for a big hug. I make myself stiff, let his smooth hands and taut arms bounce right off. My skin smells briny. His still smells like cologne, but for some reason it smells awful now.

"I tried leading them off," he says all earnestly, as the stony-faced guard pulls him back. "But they caught me at the car. Didn't want to snake on you, honest, Bea, but I figured you might be, you know, in danger, being hooked up to that thing."

"Nice of you," I say, not knowing if he's lying or even really caring.

The guards stick us in plasticuffs and herd us into the backseat of the van like true-to-life criminals, and Theo gives me this sly grin as we squash inside, like, we're so bad, and it's sort of sexy, right? I move my knee as far off his as possible.

"Did it talk to you?" he asks, looking sort of put out.

"Yeah," I say, and I tell him, since I have to tell someone, about the goneson and the eerie clicking song I'm somehow supposed to pass along.

"Shit, Bea." His eyes go bright. "That's so wick. We'll track him down. Make it part of the doc. Have to do some research before the next one, though, about, you know, alarms and shit."

"I'll be doing it myself, actually," I say, cutting in when he goes to breathe. "You wouldn't be able to keep up with me, asshole." And then I pluck the extra tenner out of my pocket and let it flutter down to the floor between us.

Theo's still open-mouthed in what I can't help but think of as a shocksad silence when Charlie hauls the door open again, phone in hand. "Got him to shut up, did you?" he mutters. "Well, rich boy, your daddy's none too happy but he's going to meet us at the station. As for you, Beatrice, I'm about to dial your ma."

I wet my dry mouth. "Think I might be able to talk to her first, there, Charlie?"

The guard shakes his head balefully. It was worth a shot. I lean back in the seat, wondering if she'll buy that the Bad Thing turned out to be a good thing. Either way, I've got my next one all lined up.

Rich Larson was born in West Africa, has studied in Rhode Island and Edmonton, Alberta, and at 22 now works in a small Spanish town outside Seville. He won the 2014 Dell Award and the 2012 Rannu Prize for Writers of Speculative Fiction. His cyberpunk novel *Devolution* was a finalist for the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award. His short work has been nominated for the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award and appears or is forthcoming in *Clarkesworld*, *DSF*, *Strange Horizons*, *BCS*, *Lightspeed*, *Apex*, *AE*, *On Spec* and many others, including anthologies *Year's Best SF 32*, *Year's Best Weird Fiction*, *UPGRADED*, *Futuredaze* and *War Stories*. This is his first story for *Interzone*. Visit him online at richwlarson.tumblr.com.

warwick fraser-coombe's

REVENGER

ISSUE 1 NOW ON SALE!

24 pages of comic action in luxurious printed colour.

(warning: contains mature content)
£3.50 plus £2 postage and packing
for readers in the UK
international rates vary.
To order a copy:
message warfras@hotmail.com
Visit warwickfrasercoombe.blogspot.co.uk
for more information and a sneak preview.

coming 2015!

The Shadow Constabulary.

THE WORSHIPFUL COMPANY OF MILLINERS

TENDAI HUCHU

Every writer wears a hat. Most people may not see it, but it's there, a kind of halo which can be seen if you look from just the right angle, at a particular time of the day when the rays of the moon strike the head at the precise moment when your inner eye opens. But the thing about hats is very few people worry themselves with the milliners who make them – a noble and much neglected profession. Of these artisans, there exists a small special faction, sometimes called the modistes, who work from an old brick factory in Harare, supplying hats to writers all over the world.

ART BY RICHARD WAGNER

FOR AS LONG as she could remember – one hour +/- – Kitsi had been in the factory. Before that, everything was bleak, blank, the foreboding ultra-darkness of non-existence. Like a baby gazelle, she had come to and wandered through the workshop floor aimlessly, skirting past milliners cutting felt, sewing and gluing. An arm reached out from behind her and touched her shoulder.

"New girl, you wanna come work with me?" said a smooth voice behind her. "My name's Peshi."

"Kitsi," Kitsi replied, taking the four fingered hand offered, into her own.

"Always confusing for a first timer but don't worry, the fog will wear off in a bit."

"Where are we?"

"Work, home, you choose what it is to you. Look around; these are all your sisters." Peshi swept her arm in a grand arc.

All around were thin figures in uniform black dresses, much like French maids. Their faces resembled cat-human hybrids, feline eyes and round faces. Arms moved about furiously working, and watching them for a moment as they sewed and hewed, Kitsi felt an itch in her palm. She scratched and the itch grew worse until it became an unbearable burning engulfing her whole hand, spreading its necrotic pain upwards. She rubbed her palms together. Peshi handed her a pair of scissors and the itching stopped. It became a lukewarm glow in her fingers.

"Idle hands are the devil's workshop…you'll get used to the itch." Peshi's tail came up over her shoulder and scratched her nose. She smiled, her mouth revealing sharp white teeth.

"Where am I?" Kitsi asked, taking a deep breath, confused by it all.

"Come, let's see what Boss Lady has in store for you," she replied with a wink.

12 September 2008

I went to hunt the great white whale, and the Leviathan dragged me into the dark abyss. This is how it happens. You plunge the quill deep into your own heart. Query keyboard? Doesn't have the same stylistic flourish.

The thrill of defeat. Tried to capture that lightning in a bottle one more time. And time is an unkind mistress. Unknowable. Made up of the universe's flotsam, the great unwashed ocean full of plastic and elastic, bending, never breaking. But the Monster is torn out of my breast. Made out of my own rib. Grown and reared by my own hand. The same hand it bites: the same chest it pierces. From inside or out – the alien or the centurion?

A list of items left behind:

1) Carbon and other elements (see periodic table)

2) Debt and overdue mortgage

3) Manuscript of sorts

4) All my problems

5) Et cetera

It will happen like this, as in a story. I will go into my garage. Arrange my papers where you (the reader of this diary) will find them. But before you find them, you'll see me, a pendulum that has stopped swinging, hanging off the beam. For God's sake, DNR!

Then again…

Real life never pans out as the intricate clockwork of stories. Beginning. Middle. End. I've made my bed. Now lie.

THE FACTORY ON Lobengula Road was cold in the winter and hot in summer. Its zinc metal roof was buckled and creaked with the slightest wind. What windows remained unbroken were caked in grime many decades old, like frosted glass, and the sunshine came in a yellowy brown texture full of dots and dark spots.

Kitsi stood on the dusty floor, her black boots surrounded by the debris and off-cuts strewn by the milliners. A languid fellow in overalls with dreadlocks and a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth walked around in a dream state with a large broom, sweeping through the rubbish, piling it at people's feet and in the corners of the room, creating small paths and never picking up after himself.

"We'll share this workstation," said Peshi, drawing Kitsi out of her reverie. "Keep it neat, keep it tidy. Do not lend our stuff to anyone. Never ever ever. No one returns things around here."

Someone from the next table tutted.

"Tools – scissors, needle, brush, pliers, pin pusher, spinner, corset stay, egg iron…"

"This is all too much to take in," said Kitsi.

"Consider this your crash course." Peshi kept on, pointing from one object to the next on their wooden worktop, gnarled and scarred from years of use.

Kitsi saw names etched out on the surface in desperate script, as though their owners didn't want to be forgotten. She ran her hand over a T, her slender finger falling into the groove. All around came the loud noise of snipping, hammering, voices humming or singing in the far corners of the factory floor. A large round clock near the main doors chimed with every hour and a cuckoo came out, jerky in motion as though the springs were broken.

"What if I can't do this," Kitsi said.

"Easiest job in the world, you'll get the hang of it," Peshi replied, her voice carefree and full of gusto. "Cheer up. You're not the first to join the Sisterhood. Only we're not in London so…"

"But what if I really can't?"

"Oh dear." Peshi stopped. Her fingers gripping a thimble like a croupier holding chips. "This is what you were born to do. Boss Lady runs a tight ship around here. No hanger-ons allowed. It's either in, or back to the void for you, and I certainly know which one I prefer."

At the far corner of the table was a small forage cap in navy blue which Peshi was making. It was of the colonial style, soft sides with a firm round crown. The peak was made of black leather and bits of thread from the stitching jutted out. Peshi took it in hand and held it up.

"You have to be careful around here." She leaned in closer and whispered, "The sisters are not averse to borrowing now and again in order to keep their quota up."

KITSI LEARNED THE trade with the ease of a nestling learning to fly. Imitation, desperate flaps in thin air, a view of the dense undergrowth in which lurks all manner of predators, for with the fear of oblivion behind her, she had no choice in the matter. Her fingers, she found, were thin and nimble. She could thread a needle with ease and stitched up Peshi's work. A few times she pricked herself and drew warm red blood. She sucked her finger and went straight back to work.

LATE IN THE morning, Peshi took a flask from a shelf under the worktop, and told Kitsi it was time for a break. They both walked with a shuffling gait, each step no more than a few inches apart. From the back, they had the clockwork motion of geishas with bound feet, their tails swishing behind. Peshi stopped to introduce Kitsi to Fifi. They chatted for a moment, giggled like schoolgirls and moved on, out the creaking doors into the fresh air.

Kitsi took in the concrete pavement, cracked, with tufts of grass jutting out and litter blowing around. The fence was brown with rust and had more holes than wire.

Lorries coughed up smoke and droned along the road. The other industrial units were as dilapidated, many were worse. Roofs caved in. Machinery stolen and looted for scrap.

Near the gate sat an old security guard reading the *Daily News*.

"Don't know why they have him," said Peshi, lighting a cigarette. "The humans can't see us anyway."

"How long have you been doing this?" Kitsi asked.

"Long enough to know enough not to care. Fancy a cuppa?" Peshi poured a drink into the cap of her flask. "It used to be teeming around here, back in the day. Queues of trucks brought in bales of cotton and left with reams of cloth. Logs from Manicaland were pulped and became paper and timber. You could smell new rubber in the air from the tyres and tubes manufactured around the corner. Early in the morning you had the wind chime of bottles rattling on the backs of Coca-Cola trucks, behind which came Lobels' laden with bread. They did everything, cement, plastics, you name it. These streets were always packed with labourers going to and fro. It's another world all together now."

A woman carrying a dish of *masawu* fruit on her head and a baby on her back walked past on the desolate road. Kitsi tried to imagine this place as it had been in the past, but could not. Their factory cast a sad shadow on them. She turned to see its worn bricks, the broken sign that said MAHENDERE TEXTILES with a picture of a hand, thumbs up, next to it.

Peshi finished her cigarette and crushed it with

the sole of her boot.

"Come on. Let's get back inside," she said.

10 September 2001

Things will never be the same again. This thing, this Monster, this tyrant, has me by the throat and won't let go.

Imagine. A man pierced in his breast by a knife. It (the knife) causes him untold pain and misery. As he lies on the ground, his arms cradle the knife, almost lovingly, gently. He knows if he tries to remove it, he'll bleed out into the earth and surely die. In this moment, the knife is at once his tormentor and his saviour.

This sweet beautiful idea. There can be no fault in this idea. If there is a fault, it is that it is perfect. In an imperfect universe, perfection is fault. But we are drawn to it, like mystics of old. Where there is darkness, let me be light. And light like a candle or stars consumes the object that creates the light. The giver of the gift is simultaneously destroyed by it. Does this make any sense?

Each new sentence I craft. Every time my finger presses on the keyboard, transmitting an electric signal towards the white page. I commit an atrocity. I move further and further away from that perfect idea. I am a builder with no cement or spirit level. Every new brick I lay drives me towards ruin. To counteract this, I redraft and rewrite, I lie to myself that each draft leads to more perfect sentences – as if there can ever be such a thing! But accept that premise. The question then becomes: is a book full of perfect sentences a perfect embodiment of the Idea*, or is it merely solipsistic self-aggrandisement?*

AFTER A FEW weeks, Kitsi felt as though she was not actually learning from Peshi. The trade came to her like something remembered from a long time ago. It was in her blood. Peshi would show her a stitch or technique and within moments she had grasped it, her hands moving with the hesitant confidence of an old pro come out of retirement.

They had a box full of hats when one of the messenger-boys came to their table. He was short, less than three feet tall, and wore khaki shorts, a starched white shirt with brass buttons and a pith helmet that overwhelmed his head. He looked every bit the colonial servant, shiny brown shoes and a pristine moustache, and he even saluted the milliners, too.

"Tell us where to take 'em and we'll do it for you and do it right, sister," he said.

"Not a chance," Peshi replied with a laugh.

The messenger-boy stood on the balls of his feet and stretched up as high as he could, an extra inch or two.

"Come on, sister, that's not fair, is it?" he said in a gruff voice.

"Never trust them," Peshi said to Kitsi. "They mix the orders up, give hats to the wrong people and leave chaos in their wake."

"Reorganised the order, we have! Reliable like DHL, now," the messenger-boy replied.

"That's what you say every time and then you mess it up again. Come on, Kitsi, we'll deliver these ourselves."

The messenger-boy snorted, clicked his heels together and gave a salute. He turned and went to the next station to solicit someone else.

"You've hurt his feelings," Kitsi said.

"They have thick hides. And trust me, you don't wanna try them. Always make sure when you work, you're quick enough to leave a bit of time to deliver your own hats. The messengers are alright most of the time, but when they cock-up, they do it in grand fashion with fireworks, explosives and singed eyebrows."

Kitsi carried the box of hats, while Peshi followed with an armful of brown files.

"Wait," Peshi said. She reached down and picked up two runners, put one in her apron pocket and gave the other to Kitsi. "Take this with you. You'll need it when the itch comes."

They went past busy workstations, other milliners toiling at their craft. Peshi reached out with her tail to touch Kitsi's and they walked on the floor tail in tail. She had a smile on her face and a spring in her step.

They reached a door with a fire exit sign on the lintel and walked into a long wide white corridor, brightly lit by incandescent bulbs. There was a queue of messenger-boys in front of them as they patiently waited their turn. When they were near, Peshi turned to Kitsi:

"Make sure you're nice to the master of the

gate, otherwise he'll send you around the planet a dozen times before you get back."

The master of the gate was an older messenger-boy sat on a stool, with a full beard that reached past his knees and dangling feet to the floor. He wore a grand coat with epaulets on his shoulders and many medals on his chest. In his right hand he held a lever which he pulled from time to time.

"And where are you off to this time?" he said to Peshi.

"Just taking the new girl out for a spin."

"Deliveries are best left to the professionals, you know."

"But if I did that, how would I ever get to come here to see your handsome face?" Peshi replied. The master of the gate broke out into a toothless grin. She handed him a pouch of chewing tobacco.

"Well, tell me where you want to go," he said, smiling still.

"Accra, Lubumbashi, Ankara, Ljubljana, Edinburgh, Salem, Xiamen and back home again."

"You have to get the order right, that's the quickest way. Lubumbashi before Accra then out to Ankara."

"That's why you're the best, but leave Edinburgh for last," Peshi said, walking into a room the size of a small closet.

"Demand, demand, that's all you lot do! Mess with my poor old head. So, it's Accra to Ljubljana and from there east until you get back."

Kitsi took a deep breath and watched as the doors closed. It was dark inside. She held the box tight against her breast. "Brace yourselves," the master called from outside. She heard a cranking sound and then the floor below them seemed to buckle, then they were falling through a black hole, fast, faster and faster, the wind running through their hair. Kitsi closed her eyes and screamed and screamed; Peshi screamed with her, high pitched like a cat. Then they hit something hard and fell to the ground. She opened her eyes and she was on a pavement outside a grand building with Dutch style arches.

"Welcome to Lubumbashi," Peshi said, getting up and dusting her dirty uniform.

The sky was bright blue and the sun above fierce. Cars drove bumper to bumper, and people walked past them without noticing. They walked into an office, up to the first floor, where they found a man at a desk, working on a spreadsheet on a computer. The fan above him spun lazily.

"This is Katumbe Kafue," she said, leaning over his shoulder and peering at the figures he had on Excel. "How boring; give me the yellow and red kippah in the box… That's the one." Peshi held it up. "I love your stitching by the way."

"But he's not Jewish," Kitsi said.

"Jewish smewish." Peshi placed the hat on Katumbe's head. He paused and leaned back in his seat. He rapped his fingers on the desk. After a minute or two, he returned to his spreadsheet. Peshi smiled and said, "His first manuscript was rejected everywhere. Soon, he'll make his second attempt."

They found a cleaning closet in the building, full of smelly chemicals and stinky mops. Peshi stomped the floor three times with her left foot and soon they were falling through space. They landed in Accra where they gave a student her first baseball cap. In Ljubljana they gave an old man a boater with bright green ribbons on it.

It was late at night when they landed in Salem. Here they found a woman, Maria Hernandez, sleeping in a single bed. Kitsi watched her curled up like a foetus, under a sheet, snoring lightly.

"I always come to her in her sleep," Peshi said.

They gave Maria a multicoloured beanie hat, and as soon as it touched her head, she sprung up, swung her feet onto the floor and marched to her desk. Maria lit her lamp, picked up a notebook and began to scribble in it. Peshi placed her hands on Maria's shoulders, stood for a moment to watch her write, and then kissed her on both cheeks.

"You can't help but fall in love with them," Peshi said.

Soon they were travelling around the world again. It was drizzly when they wound up in Edinburgh at a small park in Stockbridge. Pine trees filled the air with their sweet scent and a man sat on a bench, staring at the falling raindrops. Kitsi felt her heart skip a beat.

He was ragged; stubble grew on his cheek a few days old. His hair needed cutting, the coat he wore was wet from the rain, but he sat with his brown eyes transfixed to a point far off in space.

"He's yours," Peshi said. She took out a file and gave it to Kitsi. His name was Jonah Mangirazi.

Kitsi felt drawn to him with the longing of a long lost lover. She curled her hands tightly around the runner, for the itch had overcome her. The tool felt nice and cool in her palms.

"Come closer, he won't bite," said Peshi, standing next to the man. "Isn't he just so intense?"

Kitsi could not speak, there was a lump the size of an orange in her throat.

"This one is a *mambara*. He hasn't written a single word in four years. He's rejected everything that's come his way," said Peshi.

"Why?" Kitsi asked feebly.

"Who knows? I want you to study his skull, how broad and fierce it is. Our craft is half phrenology. You must study the head to make the right hat."

Kitsi took out a tape measure from her apron pocket. She approached Jonah and measured the size of his skull. She noted peculiarities, the prominent occiput, thinning hair, everything about him fascinated her.

"It's up to you to make him a hat that fits," said Peshi.

THERE WAS NOTHING but utter joy and warmth in Kitsi's heart as she set out to make a hat for Jonah in the workshop. She chose the finest materials and worked day and night, every thought, her entire will, bent to making him the best hat she could. She put everything she knew into it and created a fine herringbone trilby, grey trimmings, with a black ribbon around the crown. Kitsi felt it had mystery and allure to it, something a hero in a noir movie would wear.

6 September 1998

I was walking along the river. Like an eclipse, it came to me. Covering everything. Eureka!

This is how it happened. I was walking, one foot after the other – like I always do – and it came to me.

Like the annunciation. It felt divine. Dear Diary, I know I sound crazy. But that's how it happened.

I was walking along the river. Boom. A flash of white light. Maybe a soft whisper from over my shoulder.

The truth is. If I am to tell it straight. It doesn't feel like it came from me at all.

In the corner of my eye. It was there all along, like that itch that comes just before you sneeze.

I was walking along the river. In that moment, all I wanted was to get back to my office in my little garage.

THE ENTIRE FACTORY floor, except for the loom in the middle, went quiet when the Boss Lady's door swung open, banging against the wall. Her office was up on the first floor. It had large windows looking down on the floor; a series of metal steps led to up it. Boss Lady's shoes clanked as she descended the stairs to the bottom, where a messenger-boy with a large laundry bag was stood at attention, waiting for her.

Like the milliners, she was feline, but bigger, curvier, more buxom like a bobtail. Her tail swished this way and that as she walked, as if to purposefully take up more space. She wore an elegant green *kaba* of handmade *aso-oke* fabric, interlaced with fake emeralds that reflected light against the swirling patterns. It had puffy sleeves which made her look grand, and on her head she wore a stylish *gele*, of similarly exuberant green, looking like a ring of concentric halos flowing outwards. Though she'd tied it herself, it had the gravity defying wizardry of a Segun Gele original.

"Many more returns this month compared to last month," Boss Lady shouted in a shrill voice. "Production is down 0.5%."

A collective groan went out across the factory floor.

"At this rate, we'll have to lay off a few souls. Why can't we be more daring, like computer games?" she said.

There were many anxious faces around the workstations as she weaved round them, stopping here to give a return, and there to issue stern admonishment. She was firm and business-like in every movement, not a gesture was wasted. She complained about the cost of materials, untidy stations, the state of the floor, missing equipment, nothing escaped her keen eye.

Kitsi and Peshi tensed up as she reached their station.

"And this one is yours?" Boss Lady said to

Kitsi, fishing the trilby out of the laundry bag.

Kitsi nodded.

"She's new," said Peshi.

"No one is talking to you, little Miss Bigmouth," Boss Lady replied. From this close, Kitsi saw the freckles on her cheeks and across the bridge of her nose. "Kitsi, I want you to look at the wrinkles in this felt. You didn't stretch it enough over the hat block. Make sure you steam it well. Look at this brim. Ghastly. Does that look even to you? Learn to eyeball when you cut, if you can't then measure and mark."

Tears welled up in Kitsi's eyes. She shook with emotion. To see her work returned like this caused her so much pain.

Boss Lady lowered her voice. It became gentle, maternal even: "You do know you only have two chances left. We'd hate to lose you."

Boss Lady passed by, the messenger-boy in tow.

Kitsi felt Peshi's tail on her shoulder. She brushed it off and buried her face in her hands.

"It's going to be okay. No one ever gets it right the first time," Peshi said.

"I did," a voice said from behind them. It was Fafi, Peshi's arch-rival. She walked tall and confident. "Look newbie, maybe you ought to think about finding a new master."

"Be careful," Peshi said, almost a growl.

"She hasn't told you, has she?" Fafi ignored her. "All her little apprentices this year have failed and gone back to the void. That never happens at my table. Think about that, and come join me if you want. I'm right in the corner, table number 23."

Fafi turned and left, her tail erect, high up above her head.

"Poacher," Peshi said.

IN THE MIDDLE of the factory floor stood an old loom. Beside it sat the most beautiful woman in the room, fully human in her form. She had smooth black skin, dark as polished gabbro. Sweat glistened on her face like diamonds caught in sunlight. She wore a loose silk dress and jewelled choker around her neck and sat with her back straight. A basket of Panama straw lay at her feet, waiting to be woven.

She was the last remaining muse in the factory. No one knew her name. Once she worked here with her sisters, but they had all gone away, moved into television or video games. Alone, she seldom paid attention to the milliners, but now she looked up from her work, saw Kitsi crying and frowned.

KITSI RAN AWAY to the off-cuts room. She locked herself inside, and ignored Peshi pounding on the door. There were three sets of doors at the front wall of the factory, near the foot of Boss Lady's stairs. The other two led to the materials room and the canteen.

The power went off as Kitsi sat on the cold floor of the room, surrounded by scraps of fabric whose glorious colours she'd seen in the blur of her tears. She felt the unbearable shame of failure loping through her stomach like a swarm of cockroaches. Boss Lady's voice was in her head, prodding every tiny error in her work.

She lay down on the floor and her head touched something hard. She picked it up, her hands tracing it, and its dimensions felt like those of an old book. Clutching it to her chest, she closed her eyes and dreamt of a new hat.

When Kitsi finally woke up, she was ready to create something new, something really special this time. She had to if she wanted to survive.

3 August 1998

As you brush against bodies your left hand weighed down by Gap shopping bags full of useless things you feel nothing in your right pause and in that instant you turn behind you and ask where is he where is he he was here just a moment ago and now there's nothing just heads and bodies in designer clothing going into and out of designer shops not noticing the hen frantically searching in the undergrowth for her chick where moments ago she saw the shadow of an eagle flying high above and cried out which is you in that mall where is he where is he he was here just a moment ago in and out of shops you go searching for him in changing rooms under shelves calling out his name again and again not caring that you look mad up the escalators and down again into Next Debenhams Hollister Waterstones running your high heels cluttering on the hard granite floor lit up by fluo-

rescent lights it all seems so large and big and insane a labyrinth you should never have come here never have let go of a security guard stops to ask if he can help where is he where is he

THE SECOND FAILURE made Kitsi feel like she was drowning in a vat of sticky molasses, every pore glued shut, unable to breathe and to move. Fafi took to passing by her workstation and winking at her two, sometimes three, times a day. The urge to defect to save herself was there, but Kitsi chose to be loyal even if it meant her own life. When she walked, the sisters averted their gaze, as though she was the host of an incurable ailment.

PESHI DECIDED TO take Kitsi away from the factory to clear her head. The place ran 24/7 and the milliners never had time off – at least not officially. They walked tail in tail and entered the master's porthole and wound up on George Street in Edinburgh.

They bought cups of coffee from a café on the street. Well, they didn't exactly buy them – when you're invisible, you can just take stuff. All they had to do was wait for the barista to make the right order, turn his back for a moment and one touch, it vanished; then when it left their hands, it reappeared as trash in exactly the same spot it was 'borrowed' from.

They walked west to Charlotte Square where white tents were erected for the Festival.

Kitsi noticed a lot of people milling about in fine hats, some of which she immediately realised had been made by the Worshipful Company of Milliners in their little factory in Harare. It was easy to differentiate their hats from the normal human hats. For a start, their clients seldom wore clothes to match the hat for they were unaware they had it in the first place, and there was a certain aura which marked their handiwork.

"If only you'd been here last year. I would have taken you to Abekouta in Nigeria for the Ake Festival. My, you should have seen what hats they wore!" said Peshi, excited in the warm summer air. "Their *geles* put Boss Lady to shame."

"How long have you been doing this?" Kitsi asked. She was melancholic.

"Since 1969. My first writer was David Maillu from Kenya. I still make his hats," Peshi replied wistfully.

The iron railings outside the square were papered with posters advertising shows. Crowds went through the gates, past the reception with shelves of free guides and rows of ticket stalls to the left. They walked into the gardens, on an open grassy square where many chairs had been placed. People sat in the sun, drank alcohol and read books. Kitsi and Peshi ensconced themselves on some deck chairs.

"If anyone tries to sit on you, poke them up the arse with your finger," Peshi said. She reached into her apron pocket and took out her runner, for the itch had come upon her.

"Do you ever wish you were free like them?" Kitsi asked, looking at the humans wandering around.

"What makes you think they *are* free?"

"Their lives are not tied to some grimy factory like ours."

"You have much to learn. They have their own petty issues and struggles, just like we do. Every day is a battle for them, as it is for us. The writers especially are slaves to their craft. No one is absolutely free. We all are what we are and how we make the best of it is what defines who we are."

They were close to the bookshop, but couldn't see within because there was a long queue of people, winding round, waiting to see the author of a very popular fantasy series. Peshi pointed out a writer wearing Somi's wide brimmed cavalier hat, which had a red ribbon and blue ostrich plume tucked in.

More writers walked in and out of the green room. Kitsi liked a purple stovepipe hat worn by an austere-looking woman, which Peshi said was made by Anami. Behind her was a tall man in a sombre black suit who wore a frivolous yellow cocktail hat on the right side of his head, complete with a veil. Peshi sniggered.

"That's why I told you not to trust the messenger-boys," she said. "He's Neville Sutton, a writer of very *serious* literary fiction. Now, someone gave him a romance hat, his new novel is, I swear, Mills and Boon to the core, yet critics fall over themselves, raving about how profound it is. 'An acute expression of the human condition.'"

"I think he looks lovely in that hat."

"Oh, look, here's one of mine." Peshi pointed at a woman in jeans and a T-shirt who wore a leopard skin headband with many feathers. "She writes gritty feminist novels and I gave her a Zulu *impi*'s headgear. You gauge your writer – are they a peacock or a mole or something in between? – and then you make the hat to fit. It doesn't matter what sex they are, so long as it's the right one for them."

That afternoon they lounged and drank pot loads of coffee, watching their sisters' creations: cloches, kufi caps, ten-gallon hats, garbos, hennin, Pende beaded crowns, shakos, turbans, Himba ekoris, all manner of creations in wild colours and styles, some of which they couldn't even name. It was one thing for Kitsi to see them in the factory, but out here in the real world, it was dizzying and dazzling: for the milliners, writers at a festival were models on a catwalk. And every now and again, she saw a writer whose head was far too large for their hat.

KITSI SHUT HERSELF in the off-cuts room. There were tall shelves full of little bits of material of different forms and sizes in transparent tubs. Under a pile of cloth, she retrieved the album and began to look at the pictures within. The dust from the book clung to her hands. In it she saw hats of such exuberance and dare, she could not believe they could have been made here, or anywhere for that matter.

She was so engrossed that she didn't notice the door open and a tall figure loom, watching her. A voice startled her:

"I was wondering where that went."

Kitsi was startled and dropped the album. It was the muse, leaning against the doorframe, her arms folded. Her long afro brushed against the top of the frame. She hid one hand behind her back and smiled at Kitsi.

"You should have seen this place when my sisters worked here. In those days we made such marvels as you cannot imagine, child. We hatted poets in the Arab lands, Russian novelists whose work is without equal, French satirists, started Anglo Sci-Fi, whispered to West African myth makers, gave dreams to Shona storytellers, we did them all."

"Why did you stop?" Kitsi asked, closing the album.

"My kind is fickle. Film came in, then television, then video games; my sisters all moved to America or Japan. Why else do you think those forms exploded while your art withers?" The muse sighed. "I stayed on, but couldn't do it myself. Luckily, or not, the universe abhors a vacuum. I was alone in this place when the first of your kind popped up and took her place at a station. Soon you'd infested the place like rats and we had post-modern grotesqueries all over the place. The beginning of the end if you ask me. Thank God my sisters left material and some basic designs, otherwise who knows what other travesties you lot would have wrought upon the world."

Kitsi stood up, walked over to the muse and offered the book back. Unable to meet her eye to eye, she looked down at the muse's feet which were in simple rubber soled sandals with *rekeni* straps.

"You keep it, child. The milliner's existence is fragile, she pops into being as she is needed, and out of it when she's no longer useful," the muse said and not without some sadness. "Yet from the moment you arrive you are fully formed with speech and knowledge, almost as though you're recycled, no reincarnated. I pity your lot. Take this." From behind her back, she brought out the most elegant woven Panama straw, painted with varying shades of yellow and orange.

"It's beautiful," Kitsi said, afraid to touch it.

"Take it. It's yours, child, and good luck to you."

The muse left her in the room and within a minute Peshi rushed in, begging to be told what had happened. This was the first time any of them had seen the muse get up to walk, let alone speak with one of them. Kitsi went back to work and made the best hat she could.

22 June 1998

I knock my head against the wall. I take drugs. I take long meandering walks. Imagine the plumber who can't come into work on Monday because he has plumber's block*!*

Where do our ideas come from? No, that makes it sound too hocus-pocussy. As if they're drawn

from the ether. It's not that I don't have ideas, it's just everything I think of is too pedestrian. Not daring enough. Been done before, by someone else, better.

What if I lack the genius required? Nonsense. Writing is carpentry, there's no magic in that. Instead of wood we use words. Allusion to St Joseph. Father. Protector. Cuckold. Loose connections.

I try to think, to conjure it up, but nothing comes to me. Maybe I try too hard. Hit the library. Hit the gym. Hit myself. Give it time, it will come. And if I'm just not good enough? Shame! Fuck it.

WHEN POWER WENT off during the day, the factory was dim, but the sisters went on with their work regardless. Pigeons fluttered their wings and cooed as they roosted on the metallic roof struts above. Kitsi no longer had to work now, though she helped Peshi from time to time. All she could do was wait for the verdict on her last hat. Her neck was stretched out on the guillotine, waiting for the blade to swing down. She stood near the left wall and read the names inscribed, one to a brick, in crayon. These were the novices that didn't make it, some of their names too faded to be legible, then as she got further up the wall, no more names, just Xs. They'd done that because space was running out. Kitsi realised that if she returned to the void, all that would be left would be an X and nothing more. The other sisters averted their eyes as she wandered between the worktops, checking out new designs. Nanomi was creating her trademark seed hats, each the size of an acorn, which sprouted and grew into awesome creations once they touched the writer's scalp. But none of these wonders did anything for Kitsi's humour. She decided to go out and take a walk, hand in hand with her fear, along the Mukuvisi River, for her fate was now irredeemably out of her hands.

7 April 1998

Every Tuesday and Thursday, without respite, I commit an act of fraud. Let's define some terms via the Oxford Dictionary*:*

Fiction: (late Middle English [in the sense 'invented statement']: via Old French from Latin fictio(n-), from fingere 'form, contrive'. Compare with feign and figment.) ***Something that is invented or untrue.***

Fraud: (Middle English: from Old French fraude, from Latin fraus, fraud- 'deceit, injury'.) ***A person or thing intended to deceive others, typically by unjustifiably claiming or being credited with accomplishments or qualities.***

Notice how the two words are near synonymous. And that's what I do standing in front of my students every Tuesday and Thursday, without respite. I peddle empty words and they lap them up like sponges. When I was a child I liked stories – every child likes stories. I'd sit on my grandma's lap and order her to tell me ngano. *As soon as she was finished, I would order her to tell it again. I could listen to the same story a thousand and one times and, each time, enjoy it just as much as I did during the first telling.*

KITSI DECIDED IF she was going down, she'd do it in style. From the muses' album she'd seen the hats of the masters, Dostoevsky's grey and black cloches with small intricate labyrinths, like brain gyri and sulci, and Tolstoy's large multicoloured sombreros, packed with figurines of people, animals, machines of war, grand in scope and ambition.

She had the muse's elegant straw and set about doing her work. Peshi was not allowed to help her, she was on her own, those were the rules. Each breath Kitsi took smelt of the glue used by the pot load in the factory.

She wet the straw thoroughly and was glad to see the paintwork didn't run or ruin. The straw was light and soft to the touch and bendy. She placed it on a hat block and gently stretched it out. Nothing she'd used before felt so malleable; as though her thoughts transmitted themselves perfectly into the shallow crown she created to fit off-centre, on the left side of the head.

The brim Kitsi made was a large disk, exuberant like the rings of Saturn. She could feel the sisters' eyes watching her work with this beautiful material as she trimmed the border and sewed black ribbon there.

She made a red rose, stuck it on the side of the crown, and, within, inserted embracing figurines, male and female. Then she glued tiny straw poles with stars on either end. Inside the hat she inserted soft white cotton lining, marked out with the graffiti from the Roman alphabet.

The muse passed by her table and gave her a little wink.

KITSI FOUND JONAH pensively walking along the Water of Leith with his two dogs. As she placed the hat on him, it blocked the sun over his head, leaving him in the grip of its shadow. He froze: a sybaritic look of horror stencilled on his face.

3 March 1998

Subjective assertion: I am a sick man.

Everything's fucked! End of the world type calamity – mass extinction event, cancel Christmas, hope you bought insurance. On mornings like this I fear I'll be revealed as the fraud that I am. Fantastic new review from Michelle Koda of the Times. *The book is two years old and they're reviewing it again! What the fuck?*

Sold 15,000 copies – 14,446 to be exact.

Hardly going to shake the world is it? It's cold and bleak in adulthood and no one gives a crawling fuck. The signs are there in the stars; you just need a kaleidoscope. Last week I did a festival in Glasgow and was shocked people even bothered to turn up to my event. The fucking moderator hadn't even read my work. Regurgitated the same list of clichés.

The novel is dead/dying. So it goes.

THE MESSENGER-BOY came with news of the manuscript, a full decade after Kitsi had made her hat. No milliner had ever had to wait that long for ascension.

Kitsi gave a tired smile, but it turned into a grimace when the messenger-boy told her of Jonah's end.

"It's my fault," she said to Peshi.

"Don't blame yourself, they do that sometimes," Peshi replied. "All that matters is that you made it."

"An evil trade, my life for his."

"The universe is built on trade-offs."

The sisters gathered around Kitsi, even Fafi gave a half-hearted word of congratulations. Boss Lady descended from her office. She made a speech about the labour of creation, the part the milliners played in preserving a dying art, and she inducted the newest milliner into the Worshipful Company.

Like all before her, Kitsi received a pair of white gloves and copper scissors to the applause of the Sisterhood.

She curtsied and turned to her workstation. The factory was filled with ululation and song, the noise echoed off the zinc metal roofing. Kitsi didn't feel joy; instead she had the full awareness of the terrors that lay ahead, the hats to be made.

Tendai Huchu's first novel, *The Hairdresser of Harare*, was released in 2010, and has been translated into German, French and Italian. His short fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *The Manchester Review*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Gutter*, *AfroSF*, *Wasafiri*, *Warscapes*, *The Africa Report*, *Kwani?* and elsewhere. In 2013 he received a Hawthornden Fellowship and a Sacatar Fellowship. He was shortlisted for the 2014 Caine Prize. His new novel is *The Maestro, The Magistrate & The Mathematician*.

Ali Raym wants to do is give up smoking.
So why is his entire life falling apart?
Why are new mistakes and old terrors conspiring against him?
Why is he being plagued by the very worst spectre from his childhood?
And why does giving up suddenly – horrifyingly – feel much, much more like giving in?

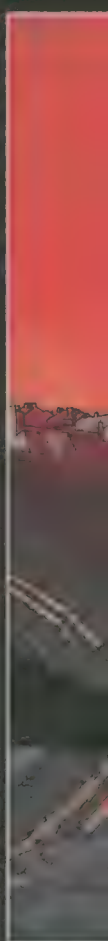
OUT NOW!

"Carole Johnstone's *Cold Turkey* is darkly funny, assuredly written, and deliciously creepy. It's also the best giving up smoking manual I've read"
— SARAH PINBOROUGH —

"A disturbing, nightmarish yet also darkly humorous take on the perils of addiction, self-deception and lost time; in some ways Cold Turkey is reminiscent of a Stephen King story – if King had grown up in Motherwell instead of Maine – but Carole Johnstone's voice is distinctively Scottish, her talent uniquely her own"
— LISA TUTTLE —

"From its grisly opening gambit reminding the reader of the dark, phlegmy fate awaiting all who fail to give up the snouts, to its climactic stalking, creeping, flailing, bloody finale, this is what horror should be like – as ghastly as examining the contents of a dying man's hankie, and a hell of a lot more fun"
— CHRISTOPHER FOWLER —

"Part nightmare, part pitch black comedy, Johnstone's novella has a hallucinatory quality that keeps you guessing until the final reveal. Cold Turkey is genuinely chilling, an addictive mystery that will have readers turning pages until well after midnight. It is Johnstone's skill in characterisation and in the rendering of dialogue, however, that is most consistently mesmerising. Cold Turkey must surely be Carole Johnstone's most confident and assured achievement to date and I loved reading it"
— NINA ALLAN —



Buy *Cold Turkey* for £10 or subscribe to five TTA Novellas for just £30, free postage worldwide. Visit our website for more information: ttapress.com/shop/

COLD TURKEY

CAROLE JOHNSTONE

TTA NOVELLAS 3

Wraparound cover art by Warwick Fraser-Coombe
fi format paperback, 160 pages on cream bookwove, matt laminated cover

Coming soon: The Teardrop Method by Simon Avery

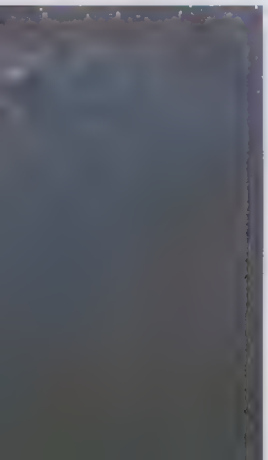
ALIYA WHITELEY
BLOSSOMS FALLING DOWN

HAIKU ROOM

This is the sign on the door. All the rooms in Daiki's Floating Pagoda have been explored by Neil apart from this one; the idea of an evening of poetry does not appeal for his one night off a month. Not when there's Geisha Room, and Samurai Room. But tonight he wants something different, and for the sake of completion perhaps he should take a look inside. There are many other cultures he could visit, of course, but Japan has something special. Something more refined.

Hopefully they won't ask him to write or recite any poetry, but he's prepared to have young women spout it at him if it comes with tea. But, even with those thoughts in his head, he hesitates in front of the door. Doors are difficult for him. Why must there always be dread at the act of opening one? What could possibly be on the other side that merits this kind of hesitation? Fear of the unknown, that's what it is, he thinks. The fact that we're all being held fast right now.

The fact that there is no real escape.



ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD WAGNER

When he works, there are no doors. Everything there is to see is on display: everything, and nothing.

Is there a word for a fear of the opening and closing of doors? If so, it wouldn't fit in a haiku. The incompatibility of the panic and the poetic form does the trick. He turns the handle, and enters a world of falling cherry blossoms, and the deliberate, respectful plucking of a shamisen by a beautiful employee of Daiki's Floating Pagoda.

"A good job," says Mama-san as she checks Katsumi's hairline. "They've pulled the skin very tight. It should last. Have you learned the book?"

"I think so," says Katsumi. She looks at the curve of Mama-san's back in the mirror as her stitches are examined, and then at her new eyes, and the white make-up that covers her face. Her eyes are still too light in colour to be convincing, but that particular set of injections scares her. Perhaps, if things go well, she'll get it done in a few months' time, but for now she'll put up with the irritation of contact lenses.

She unscrews the case on the dressing table and pops each little black disc into her eyes. When her vision clears she draws the red cupid's bow on her lips, and combs her dyed black hair through her fingers.

Mama-san, watching the procedure, nods in satisfaction. "I tell you I am overwhelmed by work," she says. "And you say…"

O snail
Climb Mount Fuji
But slowly, slowly.

"Good," says Mama-san. "Now I tell you I am disappointed in love," says Mama-san. She is so old – a genetic Japanese. The first real one Katsumi has ever seen.

Skylark on moor –
Sweet song
Of non-attachment.

"Take your time on the second line. It is no less important than the beginning or the end. Each word has weight, yes? The same…" Mama-san moves one hand horizontally through the air. Katsumi has no idea what this means, but she attempts an expression of understanding.

"Come, then. Out. It's a slow night. A good night to start."

The kimono is not comfortable; nor are the silk slippers that bunch up her toes to make her feet look smaller, but Katsumi stands up and glides as best she can through the preparation room, with its Western-style tables, chairs, mirrors, and metal clothes hangers. An incongruous sliding door, currently shut, leads to the Haiku Room.

She takes a breath. This is what she has worked for. Months of training, of pain, for this moment. Now she must prove to Daiki-san that she has been worth the initial investment. Women fight so hard across the decks for these places: written and oral tests, measurements of body and personality. Here she is: from Mexico deck to Japan. A very rare move.

Mama-san, beside her, gives a discreet cough and the door is slid back by the servant who kneels on the other side. The light is pure and clean. Dazzling, for a moment, but she keeps her face serene and moves through the opening, remembering not to acknowledge the servant. She breathes in this room, this pinnacle of personal achievement. The wooden floor and the three paper walls make for such a calm, evocative space. The fourth wall is missing; instead there is a projection of a cherry tree in blossom. The scent of it can be caught on the breeze – how do they do that? Katsumi wonders. There are even some delicate pink petals strewn on the floor.

Beyond the tree the projection shows a lake, the colour of green glass, and above it rises Mount Fuji, leading the eyes up to a perfect Earth sky.

A sharp pain brings Katsumi back to the room, courtesy of the pointed elbow of Mama-san, who prods her twice more, no doubt to remind her who is boss. It's time to work.

There are few visitors. They kneel in the Japanese style, with her co-workers entertaining them. There are five other girls in the room, but Katsumi can only remember the name of one since meeting them this morning: Ayameko. She is so small and delicate with her hands. Katsumi felt such envy when they were introduced.

That must be why she remembers her now. She is kneeling beside, slightly behind, a middle-aged man with a moustache and beard. He is tall, dark-blond, and blue-eyed. Nordic deck, no doubt – or if not they would take him in a heartbeat.

He is sipping his tea and staring out to Fuji, much as she would, given the time and money. His wealth sits in the clean, pressed lines of his clothes. Ayameko talks to him, and he gives no sign of listening. Katsumi wonders which haiku she is reciting. Something about the beauty of the natural world, perhaps. That would be an appropriate choice.

Where should she go, then? Everyone is being entertained, and she has not been told where to stand, or sit, in such a case. She hesitates, in a sweat of indecision, and Mama-san saves her, putting a hand on her back and steering her with great, surprising strength to the Nordic man. Ayameko's perfect oriental eyes flicker upwards, take in the situation, and she rises so gracefully to glide away with Mama-san behind her. Katsumi takes her place. The wooden floor is warm under her knees.

The man does not comment. He sips his tea, and when he puts down the bowl Katsumi refills it deftly, as she has been taught to do. But she feels his attention move to her trembling hands.

She prays he won't mention it – those give-away nerves – and he doesn't. His silence is a gift to her, and she feels so grateful to him that it makes her want to thank him, somehow. She gathers her courage and says, in a whisper:

A caterpillar
this deep in fall
still not a butterfly

The poem ends with a long silence. Then he says, "That's nice. Pretty." He drinks more tea, with a delicacy she has not seen in a man before. She heard Nordic deck was all rowing around in longships, hunting animals, and getting drunk. What a wonderful place Earth must have been, once upon a time; no matter how they all try to preserve it on this endless voyage something important has been lost along the way. The generations cannot pass on that feeling of belonging to a real world, and she feels the absence of it, has done since she was a child. She used to sit in their small house, eating bean burritos, and watching her father work through the window. He would stand out on the street every day in his sombrero and faded black suit, just in case a tourist strolled past and asked for the mariachi to play a song.

The hole inside her since she first saw him waiting there – that space where authenticity should have lived. Where meaning should sit for every one of them. Can she find it here, now, in this room? She says:

With dewdrops dripping,
I wish somehow I could wash
this perishing world

This time the man responds on a deeper level, with a frown that petrifies her, in case she has caused offence. But then he says, "Yes. I wish we could make it better. For everyone. It's so hard, to keep going. Hoping for a better place."

She knows a good haiku for this:

Unknowingly he guided us
over pathless hills
with wisps of hay

He breathes out, long and low. "How did you know?" he says. "Do you think I'm guiding us all? Over pathless hills?" He turns to look at her face. She averts her eyes quickly, bowing her head to stare at the smooth silk of her kimono. She must defuse the situation; it's not her job to draw attention to herself in this way.

Butterflies flit
in a field of sunlight
that is all

He seems to hear something in the words that she did not intend. He nods, and says, "Everything changes, doesn't it? I started out on Nordic deck, took the exams, worked up to Navigator. Usually I come to Japan deck on my downtime, but for the samurais and ninjas, that kind of thing. And geishas, of course. It's okay, I know you're not a geisha. I'm just saying I wanted a

change, and I thought, okay, poetry. Quiet reflection." He says those words with a bitterness that twists his mouth. "I'm not sure that exists."

Over the ruins of a shrine
a chestnut tree
still lifts its candles

says Katsumi, not sure she's addressing his problem, but it's the only haiku that comes to mind.

"No, I mean, it's not all in ruins. I really do believe in it, you know, the journey. Finding a new place and not screwing it up this time. Someone has to get us there. Why not me?"

Yes, maybe some people do have meaning after all. Katsumi feels such relief that he believes in the dream. He's a navigator, by far the most senior person she's ever met. If he thinks it's possible, then it must be. A smile escapes her, and he says, "You're so pretty. So lucky, to be an Oriental. It's such a wonderful culture. So deep. Not like Nordic. And the women are all so gorgeous. Not pushy. Demure."

The thought of the whores in Colonia Doctores springs into her mind. Those who fail the exams usually end up there, and she came too close to that life. This man really believes that she is untouched by such things. She's fooled him. Her transformation is complete. Once upon a time her name was Rosa, but now – now she truly is Katsumi.

"What's so funny?" he asks, and she hides her mouth with her sleeve. If Mama-san saw her expression she'd be in serious trouble. "Can't tell me, huh?" he says. "Cat got your tongue? Come on, tell me."

Is he flirting with her? He is handsome, and clever, and rich. But she can't use her own words to hint at the urge she feels to reciprocate. This is the price she will pay from now on, and she had never suspected such a cost might be necessary. Her own emotions no longer exist. The men who come here, the men with money – that is her everything. Although she will speak to them through the long nights ahead, she will never once express what is inside her. Another person's words will not do.

It's enough to wipe the smile away. She drops her sleeve, and refills his bowl of tea.

The main door opens and people enter; two men and a woman. They wear the loose, comfortable clothes of the citizens of USA deck, and they have skin that is a colour not unlike Katsumi's, under her white make-up. They are loud, and dominate the room with their laughter as Mama-san greets them and seats them. Oh, to be born on that deck, where they say everyone is rich and well-fed, and the work involves keeping the ship in good shape, or belonging to a sports team. She would love to see it, but they only take so many tourists a year, and the cost is prohibitive – a year of her current salary at least.

The man she sits with, her navigator, watches the new arrivals. Then he turns his head to her and raises his eyebrows. "Americans," he says, with a fond exasperation.

The decks that divide them all, and the layers that sort; this is another concept for which she has no words.

"Listen," he says, and leans closer. "Are all these haikus real? I mean, really proper, old, ancient poems?"

This question Katsumi can answer with a nod. Yes, the book she has memorised is a collection of poems by a man named Bashō. The introduction informed her of his status as a master of haiku during Japan's Edo period, although she doesn't know exactly when that was. Many years ago, when mankind looked at the stars and saw something to wish upon.

"Can you say one in the original language? I'd love to hear that, rather than a translation."

He waits expectantly, and all she can do is shake her head. She knows no Japanese at all. Common Speech has been in use for so many generations in order to foster an understanding between decks, so that is everyone's first language. She speaks a little Spanish also, of course; that gets passed down through families.

"Are you not allowed?" he says. He looks so disappointed at what he takes to be her reluctance to bend the rules. Then he leans back, and some germ of understanding between them is gone. "Oh. Of course, I get it. It's a shame, though. You would think they could let you speak your own language in places like this. I should get going, anyway. Thanks for a pleasant evening. You've

given me a lot to think about."

How uncomfortably formal he is, when only a moment ago he strove to see her smile. Katsumi knows, without a doubt, that he will not come back to the Haiku room. She has failed to please him, to reach him. She grabs his wrist.

He looks at her fingers, digging into his skin, and then stares at her. She meets his eyes, and says her own words, giving each word equal weight, as Mama-san instructed. Now she understands what that means:

Blossoms falling down
Float far and long from the tree
Before they find earth

There. She has composed her first haiku. She lets go of his wrist and lowers her gaze. She does not watch him stand, and walk away.

Mama-san is beside her; Katsumi is steered to one of the Americans, who wants a steady stream of words by which to drink his sake.

The evening turns to night. Katsumi soon finds a rhythm that makes the passing of time bearable. Listen, respond. Listen, respond. Many people pass through. So many people with their variations on the theme of troubles, and all of them unable to see that they are part of the same journey to the same unknown destination. If she had their time, their money, she would not spend it in Daiki's Floating Pagoda. She would think better thoughts and go to better places, she tells herself. She would compose haikus that mattered.

The hours turn to days, and days to weeks. Months. Katsumi has the injections to change her eye colour, and she no longer recognises herself in the mirror, which suits her. She thinks often of the navigator, her first customer. He leads the way, looking forward through the darkness. Maybe, one day, he will realise that she gave him her hopes in a haiku. Then he will look back, and come for her.

.....

Neil stands outside the door:

HAIKU ROOM

It is much the same, although years have passed. Sometimes he thought he must have dreamed it, that strange hour in which a young Japanese woman, embodying every quality of that race he so admires, spoke poetry that troubled him. Haikus: their meaning is intangible, ephemeral. They made him feel like an outsider, looking in at that serene cherry tree, but never being able to touch it. Maybe his Nordic roots are too strong. Action, that has always been what he needs to make his mind stop whirring on things that can't be fixed.

He has changed a lot since he met her, he thinks. But some emotions remain the same. The shut door that he must open – yes, he still struggles with it. What waits on the other side? He asks himself the same question every time, even when he knows the answer.

On the other side of this door there is a quiet room in which graceful women kneel, and smile. There is that beautiful cherry tree, from which blossoms fall. They fall far, and get blown into the room by a pleasant, scented wind, to almost reach his bowl of tea.

What sense can he make of it, this time around? After the last time he was unhappy for months. He thinks of moving on to the Samurai Room, where he can train with sticks and swords, his body protected by the overlapping plates of traditional armour. He will emerge tired and satisfied, and he will be free of the worst thoughts of hopelessness for a few days. Until this everlasting journey brings him down once more.

No. He puts his hand to the door. It is time to hear those poems again. He thinks that, this time around, with the help of that young woman who looked so at home amidst the peaceful blossoms, he will have better ears with which to hear them.

Aliya Whiteley was born in North Devon in 1974, and she currently lives in West Sussex. Her two comic novels, *Light Reading* and *Three Things About Me*, were published by Macmillan in 2006 and 2008. After that she turned to writing speculative fiction and her first collection of short stories, *Witchcraft in the Harem*, was published by Dog Horn Publishing in 2013. Her stories have appeared in many places including *Black Static*, *Strange Horizons*, *The Guardian*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Bourbon Penn*, *3LBE*, and *The Drabblecast*. In September 2014 her post-apocalyptic novella *The Beauty* was published by Unsung Stories to critical acclaim. Her new fantasy-horror novel, *Skein Island*, is out now from Dog Horn Publishing.

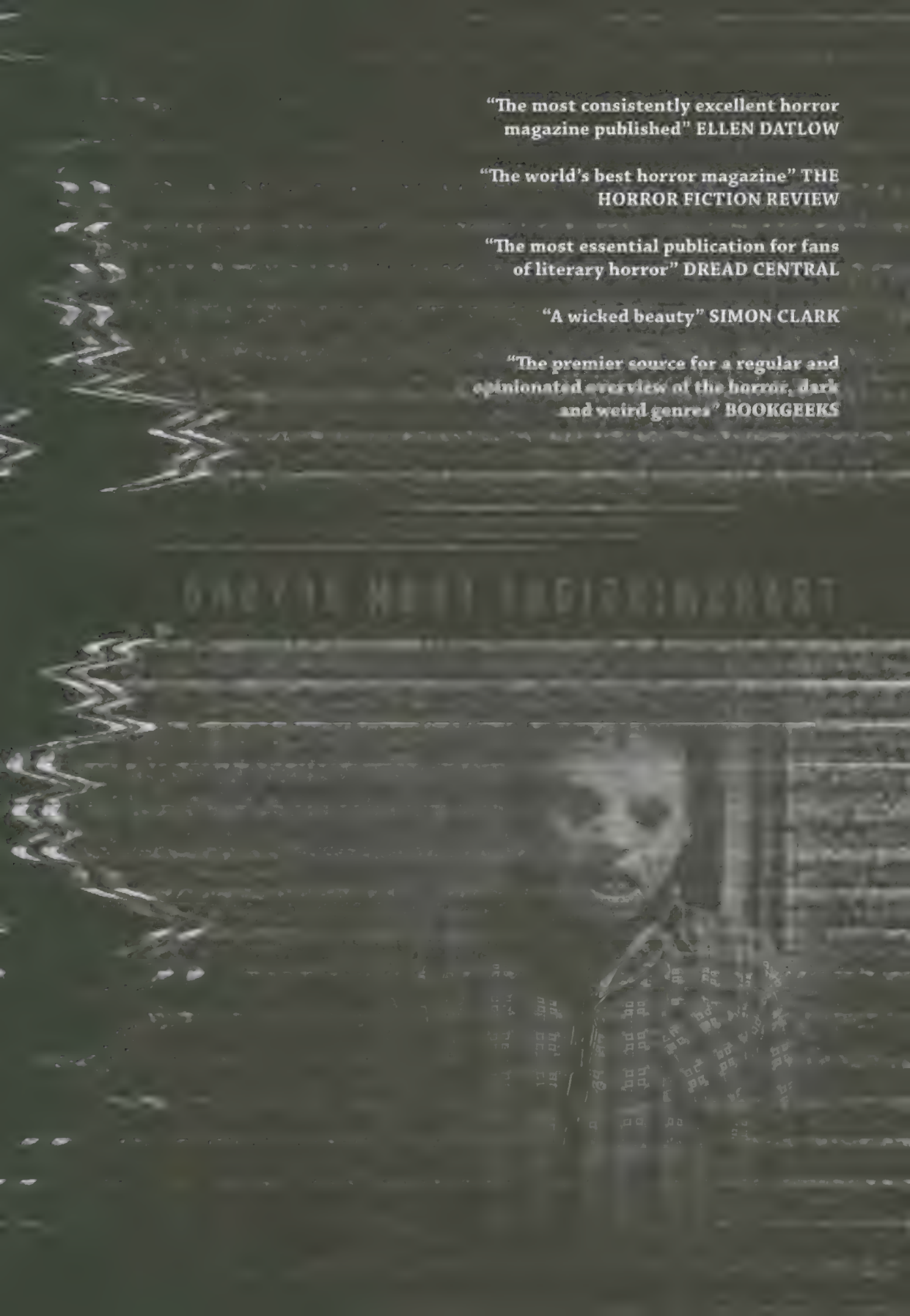
"The most consistently excellent horror magazine published" ELLEN DATLOW

"The world's best horror magazine" THE HORROR FICTION REVIEW

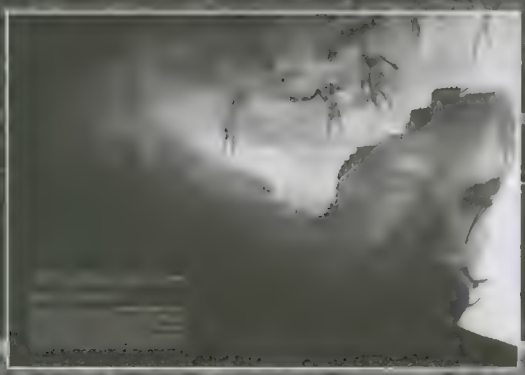
"The most essential publication for fans of literary horror" DREAD CENTRAL

"A wicked beauty" SIMON CLARK

"The premier source for a regular and opinionated overview of the horror, dark and weird genres" BOOKGEEKS



BLACK STATIC #45 OUT NOW



Fiction
S.P. MISKOWSKI
LAURA MAURO
STEVE RASNIC TEM
EMILY B. CATANEO
ANDREW HOOK
STEPHEN HARGADON
CATE GARDNER
DANNY RHODES

Nonfiction
PETER TENNANT
TONY LEE
LYNDA E. RUCKER
STEPHEN VOLK
HELEN MARSHALL

Art
RICHARD WAGNER
BEN BALDWIN

ADD BLACK STATIC TO YOUR INTERZONE SUBSCRIPTION:
ttapress.com/shop/

BOOK ZONE

GIFTS FOR THE ONE WHO COMES AFTER
Helen Marshall
plus interview

TIGERMAN
Nick Harkaway

THE FINAL TESTIMONY OF RAPHAEL IGNATIUS PHOENIX
Paul Sussman

HYPERLUMINAL
Jim Burns

EDGE OF DARK
Brenda Cooper

REVENGER
Warwick Fraser-Coombe

THE VERY BEST OF KATE ELLIOTT
Kate Elliott

BETA-LIFE
Edited by Martin Amos & Ra Page

TELL NO LIES
John Grant

THE GLORIOUS ANGELS
Justina Robson

DITKO'S SHORTS
Edited by Craig Yoe & Fester Faceplant

GIFTS FOR THE ONE WHO COMES AFTER
Helen Marshall
Chizine Publications pb, 262pp, £10.80 (Amazon); ebook $9.99 (Chizine)
chizinepub.com/books/gifts-for-the-one-who-comes-after

Andy Hedgecock

The stories in Helen Marshall's second collection, *Gifts for the One Who Comes After*, are a series of exhilarating treks into the dark, disturbing and unmapped territories of human emotional experience. Marshall's storytelling is based on a delicate accumulation of specific and telling detail and carefully crafted confrontations between the mundane and the miraculous. Domestic certainties are unravelled by unsettling events, liminal manifestations and the relentless incursion of the grotesque and beautiful into the reassuringly familiar.

Marshall is an accomplished stylist and each of the book's seventeen stories is a beautifully polished gem. The recurring themes of the collection are magic, loss and emotional connection, but there is a dizzying variation in tone, motif and genre: there's horror, sf, surrealism and gritty realism. In the most affecting and powerful of Marshall's tales, these elements collide and combine to catalyse the most deeply unsettling of ideas and emotions.

The opening story, 'The Hanging Game', flings down a gauntlet to the reader at the outset: once we've witnessed the claustrophobic nature of life in a small town and reflected on the social and emotional impact of its deleterious, prophetic and, seemingly, essential ritual, we know we're in for a dangerous, disorienting and exhilarating journey. Marshall pulls off an ambitious trick in the short story form: the narrator's recall of her experience captures telling detail and provides devastating insight, some of which is more available to the reader than it is to herself. And Marshall's facility with language enables her to render the tale in a voice that is appealing, mournful and utterly convincing.

A key story in the collection is 'Supply Limited, Act Now', which captures the essence of Helen Marshall's writing and her visionary sensibility. Set in the aftermath of the Korean War, it concerns a bunch of adolescents with a miniaturising ray gun, purchased through the kind of mail order outlet whose small ads used to be a feature of tabloid newspapers and magazines. The gang run amok and shrink everything in sight. On one level it's a tragicomic romp, but it's also a tale of lost love, lost siblings, lost faith and lost innocence. The characters' relish for reducing people, artefacts and the built environment reflects their own sense of loss and their diminished dreams.

There's a lot of death, separation and departure in Marshall's work. In 'Death and the Girl from Pi Delta Zeta', we encounter a personification of death, wrestle

with the notion of Death's mortality and meet his brother Dennis. On one level this is a straightforward tale of love, loss, envy and betrayal; a sort of supernatural soap opera that Marshall invests with emotional clout and narrative power.

'A Brief History of Science Fiction' takes the notion of lifespan as time travel and melds it with an arch pastiche of traditional SF tropes to explore the transient nature of life and relationships underpinning it.

In 'The Zhanell Adler Brass Spyglass' a boy who learns he is seeing distant stars in the far distant past uses his telescope to explore the recent past of his own family and opens a Pandora's box of emotional devastation.

Other stories concern the importance of anuses for Santa Clauses manufactured on a sinister production line; a can of soup's curious capacity for love; the risks of self-erasure in creating an illusion; the danger of love affairs with revenants; and a house whose labyrinthine and provisional architecture conceals a series of strange and menacing revelations.

You get the impression Helen Marshall deems few aspects of human experience unworthy of exploration. I've always been reluctant to accept the French realist Gustave Flaubert's assertion that "anything becomes interesting if you look at it for long enough". It takes a bit more than mere observation to invest the quotidian with excitement and magic and this is what Helen Marshall achieves with her striking imagery, her precise and intensive language and unique knack for making the most abstract of emotions pleasingly palpable. Marshall takes you on a challenging, powerful and rewarding journey and this is a highly impressive collection.

TAKE THE TRIP, TAKE THE LEAP

Helen Marshall interviewed by Andy Hedgecock

The Canadian writer Helen Marshall, currently based in Oxford, is a poet, editor, bibliophile, academic and author of powerful, provocative and unsettling short stories. Her PhD work at the University of Toronto has involved the investigation of cultural phenomena ranging from medieval punctuation to 14th Century romance.

The title poem of Marshall's 2011 collection *Skeleton Leaves*, an extended riff on the Peter Pan story, won Canada's Prix Aurora award for best poem, and the collection was nominated for a Rhysling Award for Science Fiction Poetry.

Her previous collection of stories, *Hair Side, Flesh Side* (2012), focussed on history, memory and the costs of the creative process and was praised by the likes of Nina Allan and Kelly Link. Her poetry and fiction have been published by Tor.com, *The Chiaroscuro*, *Paper Crow*, *Abyss & Apex*, and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*.

The Scottish crime writer William McIlvanney once said, "All we can honourably do is adopt one another; we share in everyone else, or we forego ourselves". It popped into my head as I was reading *Gifts for the One Who comes After*: for me connection is a key theme of your new collection, along with magic and loss. What draws you to these issues?

What a fantastic sentiment! That really does speak to what it was that I wanted to do with my collection. My stories have a tendency to take a dark turn, but while I draw upon horror tropes I still consider myself a fantasist first and foremost because I don't see it as my goal to scare people. I look for way to dramatise the complexities of relationships, compromised love, and the struggle for reconciliation in the face of human failings. And loss and connection are an important part of that because, in the words of a fifteenth-century clerk that have always stuck with me, the world *sinks and staggers*. It seems as if we're always moving away from a sense of immediate connection. To me, that's the horror of the universe. Frank O'Connor once remarked, "There is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not find in the novel – an intense awareness of human loneliness". I think he's right. The short story shines a bright light on a selected moment, but it creates the impression that everything left unmentioned is a dark space, a strange extrapolation, more of the same.

But at the same time I still feel optimistic, and I hope some element of that optimism creeps through into my stories. Magic is a part of that optimism. Magic represents exposure as much as it does wonder; magic opens people up and makes them vulnerable, not to others, but to themselves most of all. But that kind of exposure can also offer a sort of intimacy, even if it's momentary. And, in this respect, I find myself thinking about my story 'Secondhand Magic'. It's about a fledgling stage magician who disappears into the top hat he has stolen from the witch's snowman. Whatever magic he discovers is really just an extension of his own will to power; it strips away the childhood version of himself and lays him bare before someone who once loved him. Similarly, in 'Lessons of the Raising of Household Objects', about a little girl who adopts a can of tomato soup, it's only the uncanny and the strange that reveal her own parents as unfeeling and unloving. And while this might speak to the loss of connection, the narrator also finds a better, kinder sort of love – even if it is with a can of tomato soup. The absurdity of that love doesn't necessarily mean it isn't genuine.

What draws you towards dark, fantastic and/or weird experiences? What aspects of experience and the human condition does the fantastic enable you to explore?

I enjoy playing with a sense of dissonance in my work, that gap between the way we perceive the world and the way it actually is. It's a very unsettling feeling when we encounter it in the real world, but in fiction I find it absolutely provocative. The fantastic offers a powerful way to play with dissonance because its readers are always open to the unexpected, the impossible. Its readers tend to be playful, willing to experiment, willing to accept shifts in perception or changes in logic. And as a writer that means that I can have a lot more fun stretching their credulity as far as possible. Like the kids with the shrinkray in 'Supply Limited, Act Now', I feel like I'm always saying to the reader, "Can ya dig it? Can ya dig it?" I want to see if they're willing to go on the trip with me. If they're willing to take the leap. When I write it's a bit like doing a magic trick. I'm always trying to get away with something.

To what extent does your exploration of medieval culture and thought influence your storytelling?

My training as a medieval historian, which emphasises understanding context, background, history, goes *against* my instincts as a writer. Studying history is a little bit like world-building. It involves assembling details, tiny fragments that make up a coherent picture about the way the world works. But my feelings about world-building in stories tend to run parallel to those of M. John Harrison, who has famously said that world-built fantasy is over-engineered and under-designed. Even though well-developed histories give an added level of breadth to a work, or they can for me, *language* is still key. Everything comes out of the language of the story. When I write, the language I use isn't a window on an external world, transparently reflecting something that exists outside of it. I think language should be the vehicle by which the world comes into being.

That being said, my work returns to many of the themes I have explored in my researching: the traces the past leaves behind, the way that it always intrudes into the present. Those are themes that continue to resonate throughout my stories. But that tends to be a quality of fantasy in general: what is buried resurfaces, what is forgotten makes itself known again. Nothing is lost. Nothing is left behind. The past binds us tightly and we never manage to fully disentangle ourselves from it.

In many of the stories the setting adds an extra layer of symbolism and engagement. You frequently set stories in small communities. Does this reflect an aspect of your upbringing? And do small towns in some way open up a richer seam of possibilities for the exploration of relationships and liminal experiences?
One of the great benefits of working with small communities for a writer of the fantastic is the ability to close off that world from reality. We're far more willing to believe a small town in the Pacific Northwest continues an ancient ritual of hanging-as-prophesying than we are if that narrative element is transplanted into a big city. The story isn't bound to the specific setting so much as it is to the sense that the setting is closed off. Magic requires privacy, and the small town gives both the sense of plausibility and, as you say, the sense of liminality. Just as the small town exists almost necessarily on the limits of what we know, it knows its own limits very well; it knows who is from "away" and what doesn't belong.

I grew up in a small town – well, not *too* small – in Ontario, but in all honesty I've had a difficult time writing directly about that experience. My mind works best when it has to do some gymnastics, when it doesn't take anything for granted about the way a place works. And that's hard to do in a place where you've lived until you've been away for a sufficiently long time. And home is still home for me. It still feels too familiar. Too natural. So while the emotional core of my stories is frequently true, I'm not sure that place I've written about, except Oxford perhaps, genuinely represents a place I've lived for any time. But Oxford is the one place in the world where the imaginative representation tends to reflect reality; it's true to its mythic self, even now.

TIGERMAN
Nick Harkaway
Windmill Books pb, 372pp, £7.99

Juliet E. McKenna

Reading a book for review, I make brief notes as I go, usually filling two pages in an A4 notebook, occasionally reaching a third. It's a measure of this book's depth and richness that I have seven pages on *Tigerman*. So I have plenty to say. However I can't last recall when I felt so strongly that analysing a book was ultimately as pointless as cutting open a tennis ball in search of its bounce, to borrow Roger Lancelyn Green's memorable observation on literary criticism.

All I really want to say is "Go read it!" and if that's recommendation enough, we're done. Enjoy! For those wanting something more, I will continue, and that's no hardship because I found *Tigerman* one of the most entertaining, imaginative and deceptively thoughtful books I've read in a long time.

It's the story of a sergeant and a boy, at its core at least. The sergeant is a scarred veteran of British military misadventures in Iraq and Afghanistan while the boy is a native of the Indian

Ocean island of Mancreu now under the alleged protection of a NATO protection force. Thanks to a confusion of post-colonial hangovers, its culture is a blend of the indigenous mix of Arab, African and Asian settlers and historical French and British influence, all now coloured with the growing domination of US-led internet (and pop) culture. The boy exemplifies this, with his world view and language both self-taught from movies, computer games and especially the comic books he adores.

They do have names – Lester Ferris and (possibly?) Robin respectively – but these are largely irrelevant. They are archetypes, representing on the one hand hapless European attempts to intervene in troubled regions, born of lingering paternalism and lurking guilt, and on the other, every displaced undeserving child challenging a news camera's pitiless gaze. The French governmental representative is familiar from countless instances in fact and fiction, as are the local characters like shady cafe owner Shola, the fundamentally decent but blinkered American official Kershaw, and the surly Ukrainian soldier Pechorin.

Archetypes are tricky things

for writers, even dangerous. Such characters slip into stereotype far too easily. Harkaway avoids such pitfalls with admirable skill, creating a cast of fully rounded and thoroughly believable human beings for his readers to engage with. He offers an Italian investigator who turns every cliché about that country on its head as well as a Japanese female scientist, Kaiko Inoue, who's one of several female characters with agency and impact through the story. Don't doubt that Harkaway can write women with the same insight and humour he accords to men. All these lives are real and meaningful, driven most intensely by universal human longing for connections with other people; romantic, comradely, and most poignant, fatherly. Ferris grows ever more concerned about the boy's apparent lack of family. These aren't the two-dimensional four-colour heroes and villains of the boy's comic books.

The island of Mancreu is vividly depicted, with mountains and jungle and a shabby post-colonial port town. It has myths, ancient and modern, such as Jack the Wrecker, Mauvais Jacques to the French. It's subtly reminiscent of any number of fictional settings, from the movie *Casablanca* to the novels of Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh and TV series such as M*A*S*H. We've also seen Mancreu's like in news reports from the volcanic devastation of Montserrat, tsunami-racked Indonesia and annexed islands like Diego Garcia. Like its people, native born or washed up there by misadventure, Mancreu is simultaneously convincingly real and a microcosm of so much going wrong in the world today, and which has gone awry historically. The long British history of ill-fated intervention in Afghanistan on the one hand, and enduring comic book figures like Batman on the other, are merely two threads which Harkaway weaves into his story, to make it both up-to-the-minute and timeless. Given how often and how quickly pop culture references can fatally date a novel, this very neat trick deserves to be fully appreciated.

Things have gone very wrong on Mancreu. Corporations exploiting its mineral resources heedlessly pumped their toxic waste into caverns beneath the island. Now strange new bacteria breed and seethe, discharging unpredictable, poisonous clouds to threaten the inhabitants and perhaps the wider world if they leak into the sea. As with Harkaway's previous novels, this menace teeters on the brink of incredulity while somehow managing to stay on the right side of plausible. The international governmental response of obliterating the island is similarly just about credible, as is the operational stagnation that leaves Mancreu currently in legal limbo.

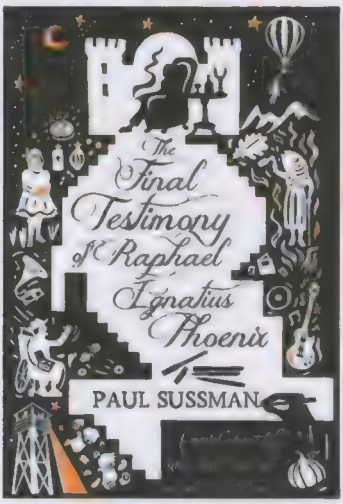
When will the final evacuation happen or will one last lethal cloud discharge first? No one knows. Meantime, the shadowy Black Fleet lurks in the bay, where crooks and foreign governments alike take advantage of the island's indeterminate status. Who's going to protect the innocent islanders threatened by these shady characters' activities? Ferris is ostensibly the island's police force but that means investigating stolen fish and missing dogs. He barely escapes with his life when he and the boy are caught up in a vicious, bloody murder which is a world away from the stylised, sanitised violence of movies and comics.

Ferris's attempts to investigate the death are hampered by Whitehall's distance and intransigence and who knows what special interests lurking in the background? When the trail leads to armed men in subterranean bunkers? That's a job for Tigerman! With verve and humour ranging from the absurd to toe-curlingly black, Harkaway sets Ferris and the boy loose with the British Residence's arsenal and a costumed alter ego straight out of a superhero comic.

Except this isn't a comic book and such problems cannot be solved so easily. However satisfying, dramatic actions have consequences, especially in this internet age. Tantalising YouTube footage draws news cameras to Mancreu. Reporters are out to track down the reality behind this fantasy. If they can't find the facts fast enough, they'll construct a narrative that suits their viewers. But the Black Fleet doesn't want anyone looking in its direction and asking questions. Events career down a path of unintended and uncontrolled consequences. Can Tigerman avert catastrophe? Which will prove more potent? The symbol (or lie) or the truth? What comes after that? How far can comic book rules apply?

Is this book science fiction or fantasy? In some aspects, yes, and in others, no. It assuredly explores relationships between people, reality and speculative fiction in intriguing fashion, so genre fans should certainly read it. Mostly, like Harkaway's previous work, it defies neat categorisation beyond 'an excellent novel'.

There are many more book reviews and author interviews in our sister magazine *Black Static*. In the current issue Peter Tennant's Case Notes includes features on Helen Marshall, Ellen Datlow, Swan River Press and more. To take out a dual subscription please visit ttapress.com/shop/



THE FINAL TESTIMONY OF RAPHAEL IGNATIUS PHOENIX
Paul Sussman
Transworld hb, 412pp, £12.99

Maureen Kincaid Speller

The Final Testimony of Raphael Ignatius Phoenix was the first novel that Paul Sussman wrote, but it remained unpublished during his lifetime. Sussman died of an aneurysm in 2012, at the comparatively young age of 45, having published a successful series of archaeological mysteries featuring Inspector Khalifa of the Luxor police. According to his wife, Sussman talked occasionally of returning to *The Final Testimony* and completing it, but never did. That it has finally seen publication is due to the efforts of Sussman's agent, Laura Susijn, and Alicky Sussman herself.

Which places me as a reviewer in something of a quandary. Social custom encourages us not to speak ill of the dead, and there is no escaping the fact that this novel's publication has a flavour of the memorial about it. To criticise it might be regarded as being in poor taste. Yet I find it suggestive too that Sussman didn't finish the novel, as if he knew it was better left uncompleted, particularly once he hit his stride with the Inspector Khalifa stories.

The Final Testimony of Raphael Ignatius Phoenix is, according to its eponymous narrator, a suicide note: it is an unusual suicide note because Phoenix is neatly inscribing it on the walls of the remote Scottish castle where he has been living quietly for the last fifteen years. Phoenix, coming up on his hundredth birthday, has realised that he is tired of living, and has determined to end his life, using a mysterious poison pill that he has carried with him since he was a small child. The Pill (Phoenix insists on that capital letter) was given to Phoenix by his beloved playmate, Emily, who stole it from her father's pharmacy. It and the Photo, a picture of his mother, who died giving birth to him, are the only things he has kept with him throughout his long and curious life.

Phoenix is writing a suicide note not to explain why he now wishes to die but primarily to describe the ten murders he believes he has committed, one for each decade of his life. In doing so, he employs an intricate narrative style. Rather than starting at the beginning, he steps back a decade at a time, describing the circumstances leading to each death, each account overlapping with the chapter before, the decade after. Sussman handles it confidently enough, but rather as with the grandiose notion of writing an account on the castle walls, one can't help feeling that Sussman does it merely because he can.

As if this were not enough, it quickly becomes clear that there is something unusual about Phoenix. He leads an oddly charmed life. He consistently avoids accusations of murder, and whenever things start to become really difficult Emily appears, strangely unchanged, to steer him into the next phase of his life. And then, what about the fact that he seems not to age? We might suspect Phoenix of being an unreliable narrator, and it is something he seems to encourage, but it is clear that something else is going on.

Initially, I thought this novel might be related in some way to Thomas Berger's *Little, Big Man*, or Peter Carey's *Illywhacker*, and that its protagonist would offer a similarly picaresque and chronologically elastic satirical commentary of his country's history, but apart from a few easy pops at the aristocracy this doesn't seem to have been Sussman's intention. As the novel unfolds, it looks as if he might be trying out other types of literary fantasy. Indeed, the main problem with this novel is that it is undermined by its own inventiveness. Sussman is so clearly excited by the possibilities that fiction offers that he can't make up his mind which way to go. Even a disciplined narrative structure can't deal with the fact that at least three different stories are vying for attention, and two of them have no real idea where they want to go.

The question remains as to what this novel might have become had Sussman returned to it. The more fantastical elements are intriguing, but weakly written, as if Sussman himself liked them but didn't quite know what to do with them. His accounts of the murders he committed are much more enthusiastically written. They're shocking yet rather funny, and Sussman handles the gruesome details extremely well.

In the end, we might shed a passing tear for a fantastic novel that never was, but I can't help thinking Sussman knew that his vivid, direct prose and excellent grasp of narrative structure were better suited to detective stories. *The Final Testimony of Raphael Ignatius Phoenix* is an interesting footnote but he'll be better remembered for other things.

HYPERLUMINAL
Jim Burns
Titan Books hb, 160pp, £24.99

Ian Hunter

Jim Burns is what we Scots might call a well-kent face, particularly in the artistic worlds of science fiction, fantasy and, maybe to a lesser extent, horror. He's certainly a well-kent face to readers of *Interzone*, with his cover art gracing many of our covers, particularly in the last few years, and I'm sure constant readers will instantly recognise works such as 'Traverz', 'Gorgonavis', 'Xianth', 'Plasma Launch', 'Homuncularium' and the unforgettable 'Threlxepia's Little Sister', which are just some of the magazine and book covers reproduced within the pages of *Hyperlumina,* his latest collection from those canny folk at Titan Books.

Appropriately (given that Burns has illustrated three different editions of Joe Haldeman's award-winning novel *The Forever War*), *Hyperluminal* starts with an introduction by Haldeman entitled 'Jim Burns – Master of the Fantastic and the Real' and in his praise for Burns' work, he then goes on to choose his particular favourites such as the organic spaceship that dominates 'Muscle Ship' and the almost-questioning obsolete robot that stretches from the sand in 'i-Robot' – you know the one he means.

Throughout *Hyperluminal* Burns gives us a chatty, conversational companion narrative which tells the story of his origins as an artist and his developing career, while in his accompanying notes to some of the illustrations there are little nuggets of information such as who the model was – possibly one of his daughters, or, in the case of the iconic 'Hatchling', used as the official art for 2013's DragonCon, where the holder of the baby dragon is actually based on his local barmaid!

Between the artwork, Burns takes us back to the start and reveals his love of all things mechanical as well as the natural world, and of the artists Frank Hampson, Frank Bellamy and Sidney Jordan. In fact, his love of Dan Dare's exploits in *The Eagle* was so great that he joined the RAF and trained to be a pilot, believing that one day he would be piloting ships between the stars. However, the lack of a British space programme found Burns taking up art and he leaned towards the fantastic having read Wells and Clarke and Asimov and the like in his youth. He was lucky after graduating from St Martin's School of Art to be taken up almost immediately by the Young Artists agency and be paid to do something he loved. He forged artistic partnerships with writers like David Brin and his *Uplift* novels, had a long association with Robert Silverberg and even encountered one Ridley Scott, designing work for his version of *Dune* which sadly didn't happen, but Scott wondered if Burns might be interested in becoming involved with another film based on a novel by Philip K. Dick.

I hate to disagree with one of my favourite science fiction writers but, of all the illustrations gathered within the pages of *Hyperluminal,* I think the outstanding piece is Burns' illustration for Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man*, which is simply stunning and a work that reveals something new with each viewing. If I had one quibble about this collection it is that Burns' "mosaic" covers made up of panels and vibrant colours are not each given their own single page so we can revel in all their glory and detail: the three covers of Ian Watson's *Books of Mana* all share the same page, likewise his real wood veneer illustrations to George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* series dating back to the 1990s could have benefitted by "going large", although perhaps that was deliberate as Burns explains the practical difficulty of his idea of using wooden veneers with cut-outs for the painted areas. It wasn't the easiest thing to put into practice and is something he has shied away from ever since. Also great fun are the five illustrations from the *Planet Story* series – Burns' collaboration with the late Harry Harrison – with the voyages of the *U.S.E. Execrable* featuring Private Parrts, the buxom Styrene Fome, King Kroakr and King Ratt, amongst others. Can we see some more of these please Titan? Hint, hint. This plea boosts some cute creatures, but that description can't be applied to the white, wraith-like things that graced the covers of the *Exordium* series by Sherwood Smith and Dave Trowbridge. They look like a cross between an albino monkey and an insect, with eyes and teeth to match; you'll have seen something similar in your nightmares.

Of course, Burns is not just a brilliant artist of speculative fiction, he's also an award-winning artist garnering several Hugos and other awards along the way, and *Hyperluminal* clearly shows why. Recommended, of course.

AUTHOR PHOTO © TIM REHA

EDGE OF DARK
Brenda Cooper
Pyr pb, 410pp, $11.99

Ian Sales

Although the cover of *Edge of Dark* describes it as book one of The Glittering Edge duology, it is in fact the third book in a series set in a planetary system colonised several centuries before by generation starships. While the novel stands alone – or rather, the duology does, as its story is not concluded (the ARC does not give the title of the next volume) – knowledge of the two books of the preceding Ruby's Song, *The Creative Fire* and *The Diamond Deep*, would probably be an advantage.

The Diamond Deep is a large, and continuously expanding, space habitat; Lym is the planetary system's only inhabitable planet. Out at the edges of the system live the Next, a robot civilisation "descended" from uploaded humans. They were banished there centuries earlier. When the Next stage an unprovoked attack on the Sweet High Home, one of the system's larger space habitats, it precipitates a crisis among the human civilisations. The Diamond Deep selects Nona Hall, a teacher who trained in diplomacy, to be its ambassador to the Next, who appear to be about to invade. Lym picks Charlie Windar, a ranger dedicated to overseeing the slow healing of the planet after an earlier ecological crash brought on by human industry. The two travel out to a station at the Edge, and meet with Chrystal, a friend of Nona's who had been living on the High Sweet Home, was abducted by the Next, and turned into a robot.

Perhaps all this sounds a little familiar: a society of machines, created by humans, and some of whom resemble humans, who live beyond the bounds of a space-faring human civilisation… The machines have kept mostly to themselves for a long time, but now they seem poised to invade… To be fair, the resemblance to *Battlestar Galactica*'s reboot lies only in the set-up. There's no "rag-tag fugitive fleet", and the Next are open to negotiation – unlike some of the human factions.

Cooper tells the story of *Edge of Dark* from three viewpoints: Nona, Charlie and Chrystal. Nona is out of her depth, and repeatedly admits as much. She's a naif, and an unwitting pawn in the hands of two of the Diamond Deep's most powerful citizens. Charlie is unsophisticated and mostly ignorant of the space habitats scattered about the system. As a result, neither are particularly active in the story. Nona ignores her orders, but since all that does is cause events to happen sooner rather than later, it's not as if she really has that much impact.

Cooper uses Chrystal's narrative to interrogate the experience of being killed and resurrected as a machine – she may be a robot, but Chrystal and her family resemble humans, albeit somewhat perfect humans, but without sex organs, and are referred to as "soulbots". This, and what Chrystal learns about the Next from the inside, is one of the more interesting aspects of *Edge of Dark*, but the novel doesn't really develop it enough.

After a trip out to meet the Next, at which the robots do little more than rattle sabres – and demonstrate that the humans are really no match for them – the story returns to the Diamond Deep…where a terrorist attack occurs. Some humans, it seems, don't want to make a deal with the Next.

Despite the kilometres covered by the three central characters, the plot of *Edge of Dark* doesn't cover a great deal of ground. It's a loop, from Lym out to the Edge via the Diamond Deep, and back again. And that's pretty much what the reading experience feels like. It's not that *Edge of Dark* is a bad novel. On the contrary, it's put together quite well. It's just that Nona and Charlie are somewhat bland are protagonists, its prose is functional without being showy, there's nothing in it to cause offence, and while the setting is convincing and well-handled, the ghost of *Battlestar Galactica* haunts the story just a bit too much. The end result is a science fiction novel that pushes all the right buttons but still manages to feel a little past its sell-by date. No doubt The Glittering Edge will find fans, as apparently did Cooper's earlier duology. But these days, it's not unrealistic to expect SF novels to be in conversation with science fiction rather than simply echoing other voices in the genre.

REVENGER 1
Warwick Fraser-Coombe
Warwick Fraser-Coombe Publications pb, 28pp, £3.50

Jim Steel

Warwick needs no introduction to *Interzone* readers – his cover for #218 is a personal favourite and, arguably, the closest one of his to the spirit of *Revenger*. More pertinently, he's also a regular contributor to *2000AD*. It could be argued that there was a difference between American and British comic traditions due to the economy of scale that enabled America to use the spectacle of three-colour printing, whereas the British comic artists, working with a restricted palette, had to rely on a more narrative approach. Obviously *Revenger* and today's *2000AD* are in colour, but both are resolutely British in terms of tonality.

Having said that, the obvious antecedent for *Revenger* is Marvel's *The Punisher*. The Punisher was a character who arrived in 1974 as a superpower-free vigilante who dispatched villains through superior firepower; his appeal lying in gratuitous wish-fulfilment for the disempowered. Marvel had spotted a gap in the comics market for a Dirty Harry-type character and filled it. Don Siegel, director of the first movie, has since stated that his film was supposed to be ironic and he has signalled his displeasure at the tone of the later episodes. It should be noted that the Punisher character first appeared after *Magnum Force*, the second film.

The Revenger is not the Punisher. Roger's back story, quickly filled in, is that of a Gulf War veteran whose PTSD manifests itself as rage. Dishonourably discharged, he arrives home to discover his wife indulging in a spot of *Fifty-Shades*-style fun. The gentleman in question is wearing a mask that obviously makes a strong subconscious impression on our man. His father also dies around this time, leaving him a lock-up full of disintegrating World War II kit that is a far cry from some of the gun catalogue porn that appears elsewhere in comic land. Roger himself slaps red gloss paint over his kit with a three-inch decorator's paintbrush in what looks like a pointed dig at superhero costumes. He has a daughter who he is not allowed to see. He can't make the rent on his dump of a flat. He is not, as the police note, the smartest character on the block.

However, he is strong and he is vicious. As well as antique firearms, he carries a cricket bat in what might be a nod to *The Hotspur*'s Wolf of Kabul. But the violence here is no Boy's Own adventure. We are given little information on the crimes of any of Roger's villains/victims, but it is fairly safe to assume that they are no innocents. In decontextualising the reasons for punishment, however, Fraser-Coombe ensures that there is less chance of the reader voyeuristically empathising with Roger. And Roger, normally fairly silent, also talks far too much when wearing the Revenger persona, cracking very bad jokes, which – even aside from the violence – is generally annoying. This is a very smart comic.

It is hard to predict which of the features in issue one will become developed as the series continues, but there are hints. Roger's situation feels inherently unstable and one has a strong impression of a finite storyline. The final conclusion, whatever it may be, will probably be unpleasant. None of the characters are likable although some, Roger included, do elicit sympathy.

Of course, the text is merely half of the beast, but Fraser-Coombe's artwork is everything that you'd hope and expect from him. The layout, angles of perspective and temporal sequencing are flawless. The line-work is sometimes almost photographic in its veracity and the colour washes – mostly but not exclusively from somewhere around the red wavelength of the spectrum, it must be said – give an intensely psychological aura to the frames. It feels as if we're sharing the viewpoint of a diseased mind (Roger's, I hasten to add – not Warwick's).

What next? The comic is, so far, set in the noughties and although the years advance initially frame by frame, time is compressed in the later pages. There are hints, of course, of several directions that are not apparent to Roger who, by the end of this issue, is starting to become aware of how self-delusional – insane, even – he really is. I honestly cannot guess which paths will be taken, but I am curious to find out. This is a bleak, foulmouthed and violent comic and you will already know whether or not it is to your tastes. You are in for one hell of a ride if it is.

THE VERY BEST OF KATE ELLIOTT
Kate Elliott
Tachyon Publications pb, 384pp, $15.95

Stephen Theaker

Short stories don't seem to have played a major part in Kate Elliott's career. The twelve collected here include all her published stories; none appeared in magazines; all are from anthologies or previously unpublished. She's had twice that number of novels published, so it's a fair bet that in truth her very best work lies there. And yet no reader would guess that from how good these stories all are. The book also includes four essays and an introduction, 'The Landscape That Surrounds Us', which sets out an explicit agenda.

She aims to write fantasy and science fiction stories about female characters, "to build landscapes of possibility and expansion", to challenge "received wisdom, of ossified expectation, and of unchallenged assumptions". The book is full of characters who do this. Like Eili in 'Making the World Live Again', who wants to see the world, and persuades her family to let her go to the big temple in Eridu instead of accepting the offer of six sheep and a brindled ox from a suitor's family. Now she's a woman she will get her chance to take the priestess' test, and then learn how the world really turns.

This isn't a book of Red Sonjas; more often these stories show female courage as an everyday part of living in a male-dominated world. As in 'With God to Guard Her', where young Merofled takes the fancy of the Duke Amalo, who sends his servants to seize Merofled "like a sack of grain". They bring her to his bed to "accept the honor of the Duke's attention". Where classic fairy tales like 'The Princess and the Frog' or 'Beauty and the Beast' advise women to accept unwelcome marriages, Elliot's story shames men who would abuse their power. In 'On the Dying Winds of the Old Year and the Birthing Winds of the New', a queen who left her king is watched by his spies; any man she sleeps with will be killed.

Elliott's women are never passive, even if their actions might be forgotten or elided by the grand sweep of history, like those of Anna, the brave hero of 'Leaf and Branch and Grass and Vine'. A general loyal to the king lies injured, and she must take word of the treachery to the king's sister; her age lets her pass by enemy soldiers unmolested. Sometimes their actions are subtle but the effects are great, as in 'The Queen's Garden', where cloistered Princess An and Princess Yara bring down a king with a handful of short, exquisite notes.

Though settings range from the fantastical pre-Roman to the far future, all show determined women getting important things done in difficult situations. Cannons bombard the city of Trient in 'The Memory of Peace'; children like Stepha loot the ruins for food. In 'A Simple Act of Kindness', Daniella, out in a storm at twilight to collect a lost black sheep, encounters twelve whispering, dark shapes; they hunt a stranger hiding in the village church. Daniella volunteered to find the sheep in part to avoid sexual harassment from her cousin Robert, in part because she likes storms.

The common thread in the four essays is we should all try a little bit harder. 'The Omniscient Breasts: The Male Gaze through Female Eyes' draws attention to fiction that drifts from the limited third person perspective to omniscience when the author wants the reader to ogle his female characters. 'The Status Quo Does Not Need World Building' defends "obsessive world-building" against the criticism of Damien Walter; arguing that the creation of detailed fantasy and science fiction worlds prevents writers and readers from assuming that the status quo applies.

'And Pharaoh's Heart Hardened' pleads for tolerance, arguing that the diversity of immigration makes the USA strong, while the 'The Narrative of Women in Fear and Pain' explains how much Elliott is creeped out by Hollywood "scenes of young women in poses of sexual passivity being terrified and mutilated and screaming screaming screaming". But she says that "there is an important and even vital place in our literature (books, films, etc.) for strong, fearless depictions of suffering and injustice, so we don't lose sight of what we must strive to change".

We see that throughout this collection. Mary hangs in a cage at 'The Gates of Joriun', her own name almost forgotten, her brother is the rightful king. We see how she keeps it together, to lend the strength of her endurance to her brother's cause: "Let me not weaken. It is so hard." Kereka, in 'Riding the Shore of the River

of Death', wants to be a warrior not a wife, and so goes in hunt of a head, only to find herself the captive of a wizard; she ends up taking a mad risk for a chance at freedom.

A couple of stories are funny, making it clear that the absence of humour elsewhere is just a matter of maintaining an appropriately serious mood. The sunniest story in the book is 'To Be a Man', a sex comedy about Felicia and Ami, who shelter and bathe Rory Barr, the handsome were-sabre-toothed-cat who ate their lady's nasty little pug, Coco. 'My Voice Is in My Sword' is comedic sf, about actors on a brief tour to an alien planet, performing the Scottish play with a pair of big stars on board, one of whom takes advantage of his position to grope his castmates in character.

The two sf stories in the book were among my favourites. The other is 'Sunseeker', in which a bunch of spoiled rich kids who circle the world on a promotional jaunt are snatched. One of them manages to flee, but ends up in the hands of commercial pirates with a grudge. As ever, the fortitude of the protagonist is uplifting, and her pride: Eleanor has refused to remove the birthmark on her cheek, a rebuke to a father who cares about celebrity and career more than his daughter.

This author's agenda doesn't lead to didactic, hectoring stories, but to stories with variety, high stakes, interesting perspectives, and different pleasures. Strength isn't just slaying enemies with a broadsword; it can mean saying no to powerful men and women, or to a society that stands against you. Elliott's characters dominate the pages, and live on when the stories are over. If this were the best of collection by an author who had published five hundred short stories you wouldn't expect it to be any better.

BETA-LIFE: STORIES FROM AN A-LIFE FUTURE
Edited by Martin Amos & Ra Page
Comma Press pb, 390pp, £12.99

Jack Deighton

This anthology is an unusual endeavour in which each of the nineteen stories (all set in the year arbitrarily chosen by the editors, 2070) has an afterword written by a scientist researching in the field of the main topic the particular story covers. These collaborations arose from an initial meeting between authors and scientists at the 2013 European Conference on Artificial Life. The authors' brief was to follow the research into the future, rather than reflect purely on current concerns.

The editors' introduction to all this first suggests that, due to entropy, complexity and futurism don't mix, the world becomes ever more complex and less capable of being encompassed by story, before arguing that the notion of the individual saves the day, the protagonist – against surrounding circumstance – is the essence of all stories, the short form of fiction being the most capable of encompassing putative futures.

Be that as it may (and it might misunderstand entropy), a collection stands or falls on its components and must transcend the bittiness engendered by its varying subject matter. A themed collection even more so. The possibility of cohesion is complicated here by the scientists' contributions. There is a further mental leap involved in travelling from fiction to fact and back again. The thread is occasionally broken and though the essays are themselves informative enough they do not necessarily illumine the stories they accompany. Each is referenced as in a scientific paper – though in footnotes, except in the one case which followed the more usual practice of an appendix. Then there was the odd editorial decision to have three stories in a row having scientists as parents being an important aspect of the narrative.

It is perhaps in the nature of the premise that ideas and themes may recur, so what in general does this brave new world of 2070 have in store for us? Well, if it's not synthetic biology or enhanced means of social control then in the main, it would seem, it is robots – or to be more precise, robotic objects, small machines dedicated to particular tasks.

We start strongly with 'The Sayer of the Sooth' by Martin Bedford where an inhabitant of 2070 looks back at, and criticises, a Science Fiction story written by his great-grandfather wherein lie-detecting technology is embedded in contact lenses. Robin Yassim-Kassab's 'Swarm' dwells on the possibilities for social control of nanobot sized AIs. 'Growing Sky-scrapers' by Adam Marek is a tale of the scientists behind the semi-organic buildings of the title and the people who live in the rogue results grown from stolen seeds.

'The Loki Variations' by *Interzone*'s own Andy Hedgecock envisages a new computer game

so immersive it changes people's attitudes to, for want of a better term, "the underclass" – and leads to revolution. In 'Everyone Says' by Stuart Evers linking of brains to provide direct empathic experience has been monetised but induces dependency on the linker and imposes increasingly debilitating psychic drag on the linkee.

The seemingly ubiquitous Adam Roberts gives us 'A Swarm of Living Robjects Around Us' wherein a man lies down and dies on entering his home despite (or is it because of?) the plethora of living robotic objects it houses. There is more than an echo of Ballard about the ending to this story – and not only due to its mention of a swimming pool. In Annie Kirby's 'Luftpause' people have been imbued with a prophylactic against a deadly disease with the consequence that they leave pheromone trails behind them – but there are still dissidents.

The main futurism of 'The Quivering Woods' by Margaret Wilkinson is driverless cars – which frustrate the protagonist more than assist him. Appearing too are holographic simulations but everything is tied round a rather conventional story about infidelity. In 'Certain Measures' by Sean O'Brien crowd control techniques have become so precise they can be used to engineer deaths to provide a political excuse for banning large scale protests. (In this case might we perhaps be forgiven for thinking this sort of thing has happened already?)

Julian Gough's 'Blurred Lines' has a long washed-up pop star so mired in degradation that he resorts to hiring out his brain (for use at times when he is asleep) to a mathematician. He does it as cheaply as possible so the safeguards are ignored. Given his condition it did feel a touch unlikely that he would then come to feel the way he does about his hirer, an elderly woman called Jane; or indeed anyone. Synthetic biology is all-pervasive in 'The Bactogarden' by Sarah Schofield. Our protagonist uses it to repair buildings while her former school friend earns much more by constructing customised restaurant dishes.

In 'Keynote' by Zoe Lambert two scientists experiment using implants on their own children to create a group mind. The story is delivered by one of the children as if in a symposium lecture. Lucy Caldwell's 'The Familiar' has another pair of scientists form a company to build an eye-controlled flying dragon to give their handicapped son the experience of freedom. In 'Making Sandcastles' by Claire Dean two more parents conspire to use their (unlicensed) Maker to change things in a society where use of such personal fabricators is reserved to the elite.

Dinesh Allirajah's 'The Longhand Option' features household robots as a commonplace, and a device called a Megastylus speeds – and draws – a writer's thoughts onto the page. It doesn't help with the writer's block though. In 'Fully Human' by K.J. Orr the discovery of mental organs has led to people opting for more logic rather than empathy and compassion.

Joanna Quinn's 'The War of All Against All' is very Cold War in feeling. A condemned man is used as a processor of metadata to try to locate those who have dropped out of the system. He tries to maintain his humanity even so. 'Bruno Wins!' by Frank Cottrell-Boyce has a man create unfulfillable expectations of a new robot cleaning system. His dog equally inadvertently puts, not a spanner, but hair in the works. Lastly Toby Litt's 'A Brief History of Transience' is narrated by a disseminated consciousness which lingers through the decay of the house in which its original once lived.

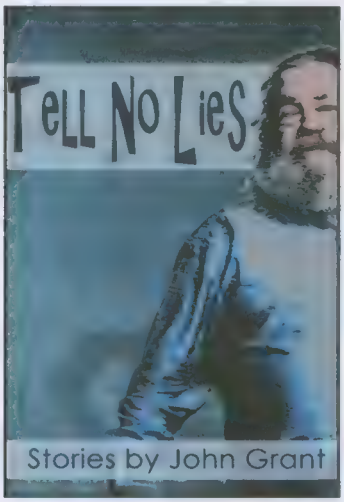
Each of the stories in *Beta-Life* has its merits but some of the developments envisaged in the fiction seem likely to come about long before 2070 and others will perhaps never see fruition. But that was ever the condition of SF.

BE CERTAIN NOT TO MISS AN ISSUE • SUBSCRIBE NOW!

INTERZONE ONLY
6 issues: £27 UK • £30 EUROPE • £33 RoW
12 issues: £50 UK • £56 EUROPE • £62 RoW

INTERZONE + BLACK STATIC
6 issues: £50 UK • £56 EUROPE • £62 RoW
12 issues: £90 UK • £102 EUROPE • £114 RoW

Payable to TTA Press (address on page 2)
or transact securely online at ttapress.com/shop/



TELL NO LIES
John Grant
The Alchemy Press pb, 343pp, £10.99

Duncan Lunan

John Grant is the pen-name of Paul Barnett, whose portrait by Peter Coleborn forms the cover of this book, his latest of over seventy. In 1978, when he was editing my *New Worlds for Old* for David & Charles Ltd, he was living in an 18th century house outside Newton Abbot in the village of Ashburton, which was memorable for bell-ringing and for its antiquarian bookshop. Neither of those feature in the similarly located Tarburton of 'Two-Stroke Toilets', the story at the midpoint of this book, but the link to the past is real, a doorway to the 1958 of ten-shilling notes and amazingly cheap, leaded petrol. It echoes stories by Jack Finney, but with a much sadder ending. Three of these stories first appeared in *Interzone*, *Black Static* and *The Third Alternative*, which should let you know that nostalgia is not on the agenda.

Another story with a strong sense of place is 'Has Anyone Here Seen Kristie?', set at the Edinburgh Festival – as Ian Black says of that, "Imagine a whole city getting drunk and waking up with a Tattoo" (*Who Wants to Be a Glaswegian?*, 2002). The story ends on Arthur's Seat in a manner reminiscent of Angus McAllister's *The Canongate Strangler*, without the murders, but which will ring bells for anyone who's gone through to the Festival and fallen into a temporary relationship.

The parallels with other writers are not here as put-downs: none of the stories is older than ten years, and though many of them begin with familiar situations, they take them in unexpected directions. The first, 'All the Little Gods We Are', begins à la *Twilight Zone*, with a man accidentally telephoning his own number and getting an answer. The next features an eponymous, second-rate superbeing called 'Q', but it's set in our world; it provides what would be a rationale for a Prime Directive, in a more advanced civilisation, and it's far bleaker than anything in *Star Trek*. 'Baited Breath' features miniature dragons, though in a suburban kitchen rather than on a distant volcanic world, and with a really good idea for how to 'impress' them. 'Only One Ghost' starts with a book signed by the central character, something he would never do, like a similar idea of Archie Roy's about a letter he could never have written. 'Lives' begins with a boy miraculously surviving a car crash…but don't let any of these openings fool you into thinking you know where the story is going, because the author has something new to say about each of them. There's a common theme of relationships lost due to accident, murder, infidelity, time-slips and slides into alternative realities; one of those last ones, 'Ghost Story', was here in *Interzone* #251. The book's overall title is a warning, and the message is "Be thankful for what you have".

John Grant now lives in the USA, and many of the stories are set there or have US protagonists, convincingly rendered. 'Commander Ginfalcio Beeswax and the Menace from Deneb' is about the crushing of childhood imagination, and could be taken as a metaphor for how light pollution is cutting us all off from the wonder of the heavens. Otherwise I might be a little doubtful that even the negativity of "a successful Lutheran pastor before he lost his marbles and an even more successful one since" could convince both adults and children that there are no stars. The Bible to which he clings so tightly is full of astronomical references. The Victorian astronomer E.W. Maunder (best known for the sunspot minimum named after him) wrote a whole book called *The Astronomy of the Bible*, and not a few of the astronomy books that I bought in Ashburton were published by religious organisations.

'Memoryville Blues' is probably the most chilling story here, in which a failed musician turned serial killer gets his comeuppance in the afterlife. The central character of 'His Artist Wife' is also a murderer who wasn't caught while he was alive, but he seems to get off lightly by comparison. For the biggest surprise of the book, though, the last story 'Benjy's Birthday' comes close. The idea that our Universe is a classroom experiment has been done before, and this time it's a home science kit – but the publishing credit is to *Nature*, no less.

Also received from The Alchemy Press: *Merry-Go-Round and Other Words* by Bryn Fortey; *Kneeling in the Silver Light: Stories From the Great War* edited by Dean M. Drinkel; *The Alchemy Press Book of Pulp Heroes 3* edited by Mike Chinn; *Touchstones: Essays on the Fantastic* by John Howard; *The Alchemy Press Book of Urban Mythic 2* edited by Jan Edwards & Jenny Barber. alchemypress.wordpress.com

THE GLORIOUS ANGELS
Justina Robson
Gollancz hb, 512pp, £14.99

Jim Steel

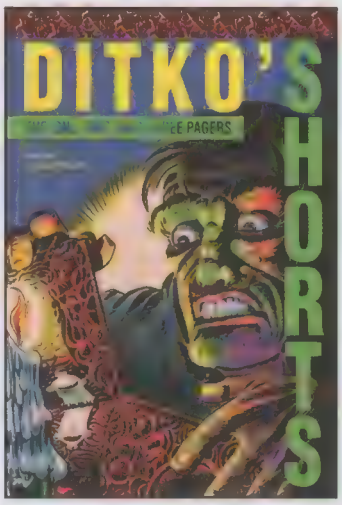
The main advance talking point for this novel will be the fact that it is built upon a society where women are at the top of the social structures. That, in a way, is a pity; it would be much more fun for the reader to discover this independently. How many chapters does it take before one thinks "Hang on a minute…"? There is an Empress at the top, true – but that happens often enough in our own world to pass without much comment. After all, the United Kingdom has had a woman as head of state for most of the past two centuries. This is hardly the same thing as having a matriarchal society.

Robson's skill ensures that her society feels like a natural state of existence. It's not an original conceit but *The Glorious Angels* is nowhere near being as obvious a dialectic exercise as can be found in other titles such as Storm Constantine's *The Monstrous Regiment*.

There's a dry and ready wit to be found here. Tablets, for example, are of the clay variety but infused with magic and they behave like just like our own tablet computers. Or are they, in fact, part of a technology that dwarfs ours? Science and magic are amorphous things in this world. There is a bizarre alien race which (judging from the appearance of Tzaban, the renegade helping to train human troops) appear to be very similar to the Kzin. They are even called the Karoo. But that is just a tease, for these beings are shape-shifters and have a much more alien psychology than Niven's psycho kitties.

The pacing could be better. To begin with we spend far too much time messing around in the capital while much of the interesting stuff is clearly happening further abroad; there's an archaeological dig that feels like a cross between the Somme and Lovecraft, for example. Not that the city is such a bad place for us to spend our time, it just misleads us about what sort of a novel we are in. There is also plenty of sex that is not for the fainthearted – curiously, the first bout is rendered from a male point of view in a public bathhouse – (and Karoo reproduction is truly bizarre) but a flirting, probing, propositional conversation between two of the characters, Tralane Huntingore and Zharazin Mazhd, which lasts for several pages, is easily more charged than any of the skin stuff.

There are many viewpoints in this novel but Tralane is the centre of it all. There are kids aplenty in here – Tralane's teenage daughter Minnibar, for example – but mercifully Robson does not allow them to run away with her novel. Tralane is mature enough to be objective most of the time but she is still capable of rashness, and is a much more interesting person to spend time with. She's a wonderful character for a very fine novel.



DITKO'S SHORTS
Edited by Craig Yoe & Fester Faceplant
IDW Publishing hb, 108pp, $24.99

Jim Steel

A god-awful punning title on a collection of what can accurately be called filler material might not inspire confidence, but this is Steve Ditko. If you don't know the name then this might not be the book for you. But bear with me. Ditko is probably most famous as the comic book artist who designed *Spider-Man* back in the early sixties; he was one of the mainstays of both DC and Marvel. Comics, of course, have a fixed page count and this collection is culled from the two- or three-page standalone stories used to fill out an issue. Most of the ones in here date from obscure titles from the fifties and haven't been seen since their original publication. If you've seen the unrelated EC reprints then you'll know what to expect. There is the odd strip that looks like merely an excuse to draw horses (for example), but most of them are charmingly weird little SF and horror tales. The editors have also done a fine restoration job in battling the problems of the original pulp process. It's enormous fun.

MUTANT POPCORN

NICK LOWE

JUPITER ASCENDING

KINGSMAN: THE SECRET SERVICE

EX MACHINA

INTO THE WOODS

BIG HERO 6

PROJECT ALMANAC

COHERENCE

The renaissance of space opera is still a rather fragile recovery, dangerously dependent on branded properties; and the last-minute dematerialisation of **JUPITER ASCENDING** from last summer's schedule after some magazine cover features had already gone to press was an ominous sign that all was not well with Warners' risky punt on an original interplanetary franchise. The studio still looks set to take a gigantic bath on this one, if not quite on the genre-killing scale of *John Carter*'s impact on post-*Avatar* planetary romance. But if the Wachowskis' barmy gene-splice of Perrault and Cordwainer Smith deploys its majestic imagery and bravura storyboarding in the service of undernourished characters and a gas-giant plot with a whiff of atmospheric methane, it's still a surprisingly joyful and disarming iteration of classic Wachowskian

themes. The siblings have banked so much genre goodwill from *Cloud Atlas* that at this point in their careers one wouldn't begrudge them *Speed Racer Reloaded*, and it was sweetly optimistic of Warners to hand them $180m in the belief they might realistically harvest a viable franchise from the investment. And indeed they've tried their genuine best to make something epic, euphoric, and crowdpleasing; but it remains the case that when you hire the Wachowskis to create an original universe you get original Wachowski characterisation, dialogue ("You may have inherited mother's head for business, but I have inherited her heart"), and plotting, here comprising a 3D repurposing of some vintage *Matrix* tropes with a female lead, a bit more of a wink and a smile, and an LD50 dose of what in the name of the great red spot were they thinking.

Mila Kunis' eponymous space Cinderella is a fatherless illegal immigrant who is reduced to selling her eggs to supplement her day-job income from cleaning the toilets of the rich (in IMAX 3D, a Wachowskian cinematic first), yet like so many poo-scrubbers has a best friend on the verge of marriage to the US's eighth richest bachelor under thirty, and is secretly the child of an aristocratic British scientist about whom nobody shows the least curiosity. As it turns out,

Mark Millar's source comic The Secret Service has been treated more as a concept document than as a strict model

these plotlines and characters vanish early on, as Jupiter herself is revealed as a genetic match for the late owner of Earth, and thus the one legal obstacle to Eddie Redmayne and his galactic-aristo sibs in their jockeying for who gets to harvest the planet in an act of cosmocapitalist genocide. Fortunately there's a Trinity for her Neo in the form of dashing canine splice Channing Tatum, on hand to sweep her up in his hoverbooted embrace and whisk her off on a two-hour 3D IMAX action soar through many changes of cosmic frock to save her family and planet. Along the way we inexplicably encounter Ely Cathedral in space, Sean Bean the half-a-bee, a baffling Terry Gilliam homage and cameo, and a host of supporting characters and storylines that seem to wink out of existence in mid-air – quite literally, in the case of Doona Bae and her invisible flying bike.

Jupiter's view of class is a distinctively American one, under which immigrant communities are trapped in minimum-wage service industries by a Matrix-like system that feeds their dreams of romance and escape just enough to keep them motivated for cleaning toilets, while the truth is that their lives are being farmed by a sky-dwelling elite who have rigged the universe with massive asymmetries of power to channel the flow of resource. "Life is an act of consumption," explains Eddie the evil. "The human beings on your planet are merely resources waiting to be converted into capital, and this entire universe is a beautiful machine created by evolution for a single purpose: to generate profit." Or, as Jupiter's slimy cousin puts it, "Shit flows downhill; profit flows uphill. That's capitalism, babe." But when it comes to representing the entrenchment of privilege in birth and manners, the sibs have bussed in a scheming villain dynasty of languidly psychopathic Britposh led by decadence-dripping Eddie Redmayne, in a performance exactly on the cusp of Oscar and Razzie. (Alas, siblings Tuppence Middleton and Douglas Booth are squarely on the latter side.)

It's conceivable that better casting would have salvaged the chemistry, if not the plot. There are some actors who can sport pointy ears, but Channing Tatum is not one of them, even though they're not even the daftest ears in the film (which instead adorn a quite wonderfully unembarrassed Gugu Mbatha-Raw). The Jupiter Jones role was written for Natalie Portman, who has probably had enough of space princesses but would have brought more fragility and warmth to a strangely passive character who does little to earn her crown and her prince; you spend the whole film waiting for her to use her toilet-cleaning skills to kick interplanetary buttside, but the thought doesn't even seem to have occurred. Nevertheless, as Sean says of his new-found queen (to audience hilarity), "Bees don't lie"; and it's all very sweet and busy, and often delivers a buzz if rarely a sting.

In contrast, **KINGSMAN: THE SECRET SERVICE** offers a resolutely British take on class, which is no less eloquently

muddled, not least by Matthew Vaughn's own 2008 conviction as filmmaker to the Conservative and Unionist Party, but astute enough to recognise that the first twenty years of Bond cinema map the tectonic plates of the British class system at the height of their historic motility. Though jointly conceived with Vaughn, Mark Millar's source comic *The Secret Service* has been treated more as a concept document than as a strict model. The Vaughn/Goldman version is no longer the British Secret Service but an unaccountable international body that just happens to be staffed by posh Brits: "A private intelligence agency, above the bureaucracy that bedevils the highest levels of government", because of course that would make the world safe. The comics' class warfare has been ramped up a bit for film, as lisping Sam Jackson's eco-minded supervillain now proposes to abort climate catastrophe by culling the human race Redmayne-style while the global elite watch from their exclusive bunker and stuff their faces with Ferrero Rocher. The Millar–Gibbons comic was a bit more socially mobile, with cocky prole Eggsy inducted into the UK's spy arm by his socially mobile uncle; but Taron Egerton's film version finds himself mentored instead by gentleman spy Colin Firth out of guilt after a previous attempt at playing Pygmalion went belly-up when Eggsy's dad took one for the team.

Over the course of a long training act, Eggsy has to prove himself in a selection process against sneering graduates of St Andrews and Durham ("It's like those state-school kids who get into Oxford on C grades because your mum's a one-eyed lezzie") and rise on bare merit to the status of a gentleman spy as he learns that "being a gentleman is nothing to do with one's accent; it's about being comfortable in my skin", and that the real enemy is the new international superelite who have commodified the human race and richly earn their Elgar-scored mass Cronenbergian comeuppance when Eggsy and his pals catch up with them. It's a pity that the film trips itself up in the finale with a spectacularly ill-judged throwaway attempt to find something amusing to do with vintage Bond sexual attitudes. But the lesson is quite an important one: if you're going to put warm, credible female characters in your film, you can't suddenly have your hero snub them for a bit of Swedish royal backdoor action, particularly if he's shown no previous inclination to objectify women as crude objects of *Carry On* leering.

Alex Garland's film is itself really taking an interest in machine consciousness for the sake of more ancient and fundamental genre themes

Pygmalion rides again into war with internet-tycoon villainy in **EX MACHINA**, a well-dressed and cinehistorically literate variation on the venerable cybernetic version of the template in which sociopathic scientists create hot robot chicks for conversation, romance, and possible Blue Fairy appointments. The last year alone has given us one great film on this enduring cinemyth (*Her*) and another (*The Machine*) that delivered impressively for its budget, and Garland's film sits quite close to the latter, though with an

Into the Woods, Rob Marshall's film of Stephen Sondheim's enduring musical deconstruction of fairytale narrative and poetics

enviably glossier cast and dressing. Domhnall Gleeson is flown out to search-engine billionaire Oscar Isaac's wilderness research facility to conduct a series of Turing-test interviews with Alicia Vikander's winsome Maschinenmensch: ostensibly with the aim of establishing whether she's hard-problem conscious, but with thunderous rumbles from the start of darker, deeper, and devious purposes at work. To those who will immediately protest that it's not a Turing test if you already know that the subject is a machine, the film has only woo for an answer; but then Alex Garland's film is itself really faking an interest in machine consciousness for the sake of more ancient and fundamental genre themes about scientists playing Frankenstein playing God, and the eternal trigonometry of the maker, the monster, and the Bride. Accordingly, for much of its length the film plays for misdirection by dangling an obvious but, for its particular purposes, uninteresting Dickian twist, while the modest but quite satisfying actual plot has been hidden in plain view all along, and at times waved right in our faces.

The film runs long and rather slow, and despite his on-set genre experience with *Sunshine* and more recently *Dredd*, Garland isn't quite there with his actors, who all feel a little miscast and underdirected. Vikander's performance is far too human to pass credibly for machine, while neither Gleeson nor Isaac really passes the cinematic Turing test of fooling the viewer into believing in them as plausible humans. Isaac's character is cartoonishly sociopathic, and somehow able to build sentient robots with no visible staff or facilities; while Gleeson finds himself in the invidious position of playing a straight, US-accented version of a nerdy persona we're more used to seeing him playing for laughs. In particular, the moment you become conscious of what it's naggingly recalling, the scenario about a worldchanging project hatched in a dankly scenic isolated location with an unreadable theory-of-mind subject at its centre is just enough like a robot-and version of *Frank* to throw the whole film off. The Norwegian locations are lovely, but in aiming for atmospheric three-handed psychodrama it winds up curiously uncinematic; aside from some minor business with video footage, it could be a piece of pub theatre or even a radio play.

A similar staginess dogs **INTO THE WOODS**, Rob Marshall's film of Stephen Sondheim's enduring musical deconstruction of fairytale narrative and poetics, despite an all-star cast and the coup of original bookwriter James Lapine on screenplay. It might seem quite brave of Disney to throw itself behind this long-mooted adaptation, given that two of its prime Princess properties are gleefully dismantled; but fans of the original can't fail to note that Rapunzel's storyline from the stage version has been discreetly shorn of its tangles and dark end, while Snow White and Sleeping Beauty (and their associated plotlines

undoing the happy-ever-afters with very unDisney adulteries) have simply been banished from the action. But the principal challenge is that Sondheim's musical is so perfectly shaped for the stage as to break the time and space of film in ways that are very difficult to put back together. The titular woods are a non-literalistic space which baffles navigation, bends paths and purposes, and spins characters and plot elements around in piquant recombinant shuffles that feel entirely natural in the anti-illusionistic world of musical theatre, but on screen become merely a muddy corner of Windsor Great Park; while the offstage world of the sky-dwelling giants and the golden goose is kept out of sight even on film. And while the first act is an exquisite coin-in-slot tableau of well-made theatrical clockwork exploring the fairytale economy of wishes, quests, and magic bean-counting, veterans of school productions will probably be quite disconcerted to discover that the raison d'ĕtre of the full musical is its second act (heavily abbreviated here) whose point is to unpick all the fairytale tidinesses of the bravura first by unravelling ever-afters, exposing clay-footed heroes, and sending all the storylines back through the darkening woods in a disconcert of infidelities, breakups, and evaporated dreams. The cast are fantastic and rise brilliantly to the material – particularly Emily Blunt, who rolls those big comedy eyes like bowling balls and woe betide whoever finds themselves in their path – and the songs, despite some regrettable cuts, still stun; and if it comes out as a rather uneasy compromise between film and stage, dreams and disillusion, Disney and deconstruction, that's at least in harmony with the message of the material.

Disney's acquisition of Marvel has left the studio Smauging it over a mountain of intellectual property that nobody has any real idea how to monetise, or even how to sort the gems from the paste. So **BIG HERO 6** is an experiment in applying Disney methods to a minor sample of the Marvel hoard that comes with negligible fanbase attachment, and can thus be freely experimented upon without provoking outcries. The Marvel property, an amiable but undistinguished Tokyo superhero team, has been fed into the creative sausage machine of the studio animation process John Lasseter brought in from Pixar, under which the film is made over and over in animatic form and torn apart in company screenings each time till everybody is too pummelled by the process to care about anything but getting it over with. Farmed to veteran Pixar writers Dan Gerson and Rob Baird, the result, as increasingly in recent Pixar offerings, is a mechanically recovered film from which any originating spark of boldness and joy has been savagely beaten out. Here the character names and powers remain, but the Disney process has battered everything else into an unrecognisably different shape, with the setting reconceived as an evocative Pacific-rim hybrid "San Fransokyo", and the plot injected with a brutal triple dose

Big Hero 6 is an experiment in applying Disney methods to a minor sample of the Marvel hoard that comes with negligible fanbase attachment

It arrives a year late after protracted fiddling with the ending, and an earlier round of title roulette that began simply as Almanac

of casually manipulative Disney familicide.

A very Japanese story about trying to get into the right educational institution sees orphan Hiro choose nerd school over botfighting, only to find himself dealing with violent bereavement with the help of his big brother's Stay-Puft medbot science project, and teaming up with classmates to battle intellectual-property theft and bereavement-driven superterrorism in brightly-coloured Tezukaesque hero-suits. ("We can't go against that guy; we're nerds! We're just…us!" – "No; we can be way more!") The project research has cherrypicked some cool ideas from big-name robotics labs, and cuddly softbot Baymax is an undeniably artful Disney marketing creation: a soft-textured hugging machine that transforms collectibly into a bright red Gigantor enforcement engine, and gives little Hiros the doubly surrogated parental love that the world has stolen from them. But despite the Marvel brand extending even to a grossout revelation in the post-credits about Stan Lee's kecks, this is a film with the Disney narrative brand stamped through it, and Marvel's refusal to acknowledge it as part of their own Cinematic Universe says a lot about who's ultimately wearing the underpants on the outside in this relationship.

Found-footage time-twister **PROJECT ALMANAC** runs on another version of *Big Hero 6*'s plot engine about a teen genius dealing with his dad's demise by building a science project to get into geek school, since MIT apparently has a little-advertised programme that awards scholarships for inventing time travel in your basement. A low-budget production from Michael Bay's company, it arrives a year late after protracted fiddling with the ending, and an earlier round of title roulette that began simply as *Almanac* – proclaiming it, accurately enough, as a completely unashamed knockoff of *Chronicle* that proudly doesn't bother itself with making actual sense. And indeed no opportunity has been squandered to dumb the premise down for its target audience. The time-travel theory is glossed in film shorthand by the group's cine-nerd mascot: "Have you guys ever seen the movie *Looper*?"; "How come you've never seen *Timecop*?"; "Just look at *Terminators* 1 through 4!" After the initial exhilaration of possibility ("You have to kill Hitler. That's like Time Travel 101!") is thwarted by the limited jump range, the aspirational horizon is reset to the threshold of its audience's actual cultural memory and priorities: "I want to see Biggie and Tupac live!" "I want to see the original *Star Wars* premiere!" Eventually the quintet settle for using their gift to mend their own lives ("You're broke; you're getting bullied; I'm failing high school; let's take this thing out for a spin!"); but when the hero's attempt to hook up with his crush fails on the first attempt, his attempt at a second chance sets off a storm of butterfly wingflaps as his attempts to fix the world only end up breaking stuff. But where *Chronicle* pushed found-footage storytelling, interrogated teen-

movie characters and themes, and used superhero-origin myth to explore death, evil, psychological damage and familial dysfunction, *Project Almanac* uses darkness merely as a lighting effect, and badly fumbles its plotting at the climax. Despite many blackboard diagrams of the plot, the initial mystery about who killed the hero's dad and where he was going after the mystery phone call is left not only unresolved but discarded entirely as an issue; instead, we get a twist ending on the found-footage conceit that would be quite neat if only it didn't depend on an utterly glaring plot bungle that abjectly flunks Time Travel 101, and this time with no resits.

A much more grown-up and, yes, coherent web of arrowed plot paths through probabilistic spaces comes in James Ward Byrkit's **COHERENCE**, which contrives a quantum superposition of *Triangle* and *The Exterminating Angel* as four couples at a dinner party in Santa Monica find themselves trapped in a bubble universe with alternate versions of themselves, and their attempts to maintain the integrity of their identity and entanglements come under increasing siege as the shadows deepen and characters' paths lead them further into the wave-function woods. Even before the quantum forces start to bubble, identities are proving friable: Emily Baldoni's heroine has seen a rival dancer *Black Swan* off with her career, while host Nicholas Brendon claims, rather wonderfully, to have been the main guy on *Roswell*, who in his reality was called Joe, but then he started drinking. ("He's just, I don't know, not the man I married.") But as lives decohere and the darkness thickens, the individual and group instinct becomes to fear the other even if they're you, and the film proposes a credulity-stretching but provocative reading of human nature as morbidly protective of identity to the point of metaphysical psychosis. "This whole night," ponders Brendon, "we've been worrying what if there's some dark version of us out there; what if *we're* the dark version?"

Made three years ago in the director's living room with no script, no crew, and a budget that would probably collapse if you tried to observe it, it's one of those films that has passed through a theatrical release just long enough to show up on detectors before going straight to domestic. But it actually benefits from the opportunity to reverse-engineer its author's original plot diagrams at leisure with pause and rewind, if also to realise (as my wife observed) that "it's basically an episode of *Futurama*," an insight hard to unthink once framed. Yet even *Jupiter Ascending* takes us back at the end, from a universe where cosmic siblings harvest vast amounts of human and economic resource to sustain their dynastic enterprise, to that same family dinner-table where the economy of true value is displayed; and where the queen of Earth may gaze at the stars and surf the differential slopes of gravitation in sky-boots with her prince, but still has toilets to clean.

A much more grown-up and, yes, coherent web of arrowed plot paths through probabilistic spaces comes in James Ward Byrkit's Coherence

LASER FODDER
TONY LEE

EXTANT

THE HAUNTING OF BLACK WOOD

ENEMY

THE MAZE RUNNER

THE RENDLESHAM UFO INCIDENT

COHERENCE

DARK PLANET

GAME OF THRONES

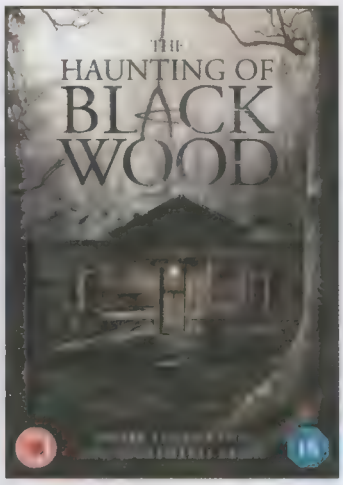
TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

CONTINUUM

HALO: NIGHTFALL

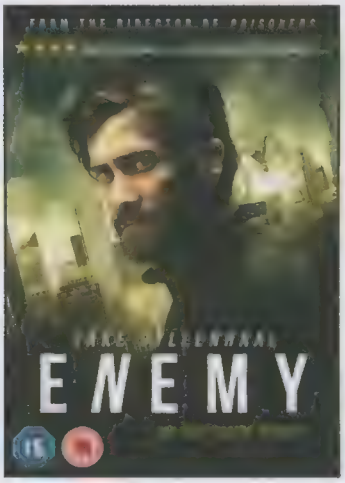
THE DEVICE

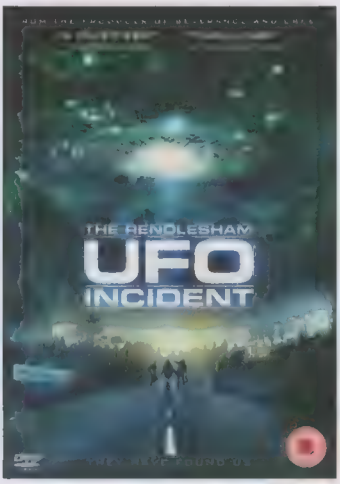
THE SIGNAL



Created by Mickey Fisher, sci-fi mystery **EXTANT** (Season One, DVD, 2 February) feels like a vanity project for Halle Berry as troubled astronaut Molly. Following her year-long solo mission, she faces all the clichés of insurmountable odds after finding that she's pregnant, while consciously yet unwisely developing a case of middle-class angst into something that's easily mistaken for a paranoiac fantasy of quasi-religious fervour. With executive producer Spielberg aboard (to recycle *Pinocchio* themes from *A.I.*), it's no surprise when Molly's android son Ethan provides a secondary plot, and so makes this fairly dull viewing because of its sheer obviousness ("You can't plug 'n' play a family!") concerning domesticentric protagonists and frequent sentimentality issues, and not its more intriguing albeit wit-free ambiguity about mysterious biotech symbols in a world of untrustworthy agencies.

There is a distinct lack of sincere humanity in this grimly derivative scenario as visual effects and *X-Files* style conspiracy ("We were the experiments!") occupy space usually reserved for convincing characters in fresh genre plotting based upon vaguely original ideas. Fiendishly dopey writing ensures this TV skiffy of 'first contact' (ghosts in space or evidence of aliens?) is chiefly a shameless concept-sponger off *Solaris* – as a spore-induced hallucinatory and earthbound variant, at least. Other SF riffs borrow from





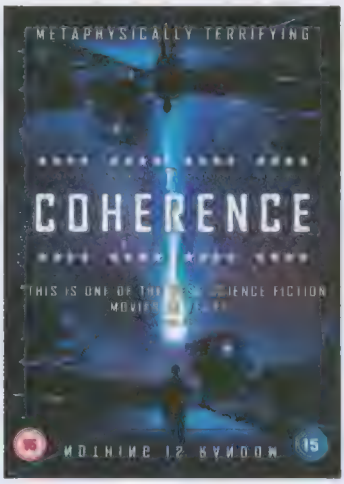
The Andromeda Strain. *Extant* delivers salutes to *Species*, some hand-waving at Duncan Jones' *Moon*, high-fives to *D.A.R.Y.L.*, and nods and winks to *A Town Called Eureka*. And it is not only the multiple cases of brazen theft that drags this otherwise high quality production down from achieving any of its typically low ambitions. With weightless subplots centred on Molly's crooked boss – the crusty but ultimately benign Sparks (Michael O'Neill) – and pointless red-herring cases like a high-heeled brand of political antagonist (Annie Wersching, *24* season 8), there is also further damage of a soul-crushing nature that prevents *Extant* ever developing into a modestly intelligent drama. Fisher contributes assorted moralising homilies that pop-up, annoyingly, at every drearily 'philosophical' twist or vacuously over-emotional turn. "I don't wanna change the world. I just wanna find my baby."

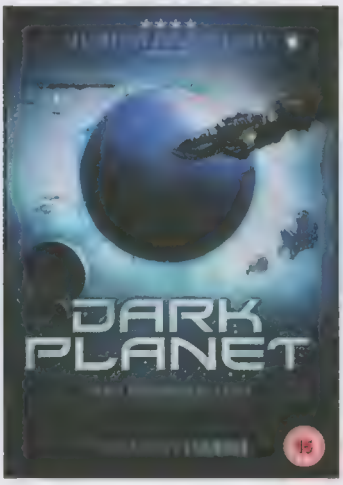
For such a Hollywood name, Berry has always seemed a terribly bland actress. Her Oscar win for rom-dram *Monster's Ball* (which I have not seen) appears to be a pandering fluke. Since appearing in *The Flintstones* (where she was cringe-worthy in the 'office' farce), *Swordfish*, the frankly laughable *Catwoman* (where Berry was out-acted by Sharon Stone on glam autopilot), 007's adventure *Die Another Day* (feeble anti-heroine Jinx was effortlessly outclassed by Rosamund Pike's villainy), *Gothika* (easily outshone by Penelope Cruz in dowdy-victim mode), and of course all of the main *X-Men* movies – where her pathetic performance shattered Marvel fans' hopes of ever seeing mutant Storm portrayed as the African 'goddess' who might have been Black Panther's queen – Berry has now become the female equivalent of Tom Cruise, spoiling or destroying the already limited appeal of many genre productions. She was the weakest link in the chain-stories of *Cloud Atlas*, leaving veteran Susan Sarandon and Korean starlet Doona Bae to shoulder the distaff load.

Frequently upstaged by CGI candy and hi-tech gadgets of *Extant*'s 'optimistic' futurism, Berry is never the cool stillness at the eye of the storm that she might think she is. Instead, she's like the lifeless core of a diseased tree. As science fiction, *Extant* is dead wood but, unthinkingly, it's been renewed for a second season of thirteen episodes.

Although packaged as a rural chiller/backwoods horror, Jack Heller's mystery *Enter Nowhere*, re-titled **THE HAUNTING OF BLACK WOOD** (DVD, 2 February), is a time-travel story, a curiosity that's part *Twilight Zone* casebook file, part *Sapphire & Steel* unsolved but 'fixed' campfire jamboree. It's the sort of dramatic oddity that will lend itself to quasi-mythic interpretation about moral dilemmas or antiwar messages.

Stranded by car trouble in a forest maze, pregnant Samantha (Sam Waterson's daughter Katherine, *Inherent Vice*) meets lost-boy Tom (Clint Eastwood's son Scott, *Perfect Wave*, *Dawn Patrol*). They share a cabin for a night, until armed robber Jody (Sara Paxton, *Shark Night*, *The Innkeepers*)



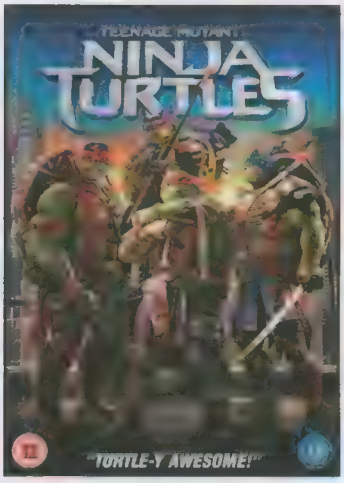


arrives. Three's a crowd, but German spy Hanz (Shaun Sipos, *The Remaining*, *Texas Chainsaw 3D*) upsets the group's balance of mind so much that suggestions about where they are (Wisconsin, South Dakota, or New Hampshire?) give way to a stranger question of when they are from (1962, 1984, 2011?), and accepting their unexpected connections brings a purposeful realisation to avoid impending tragedy.

While dream sequences and paradoxes accumulate, involuntary time-slips that affect generations result in a tale of ostensible confusions and weak characterisations, but action-movie producer turned director Heller's budget-wise approach remains so consistently theatrical, not absurdly cinematic, that – funnily enough – the adventures in these haunted woods become quite compelling. Do not expect any neatly unpacked explanations. This movie shelters an enigma that stretches far beyond the limitations of its own framework or duration. Perhaps its main flaw is a pointless and Tarantino-styled music-video intro for the petrol station heist. This really isn't that sort of cheap 'n' sleazy thriller at all!

Style or story? Think of De Palma versus Carpenter; visual feast or narrative intrigue? It's hard to have much of one without compromising the other. So, an unofficial battle of auteurism is waged between individual directors exploring artistic freedom right to its creative limits, and proficient exponents of craftsmanship committed to producing quality products. Trying for a balance between style and story may result in seemingly bipolar behaviour that, in filmmaking, wrecks inspired choices. Here's a case in point. From Denis Villeneuve, director of the lacklustre crime drama *Prisoners* (*Black Static* #38), far weirder mystery **ENEMY** (Blu-ray/DVD, 9 February) has Jake Gyllenhaal in two roles: first as history teacher Adam, and then actor Anthony, his doppelganger spotted in a movie. Adam tracks down his lookalike, as *Enemy* taps into *Shatterday* vibes with phone calls, before a joint quest for scheming and stalking one-upmanship leads, inevitably, to their offensive/defensive, passive/aggressive confrontation.

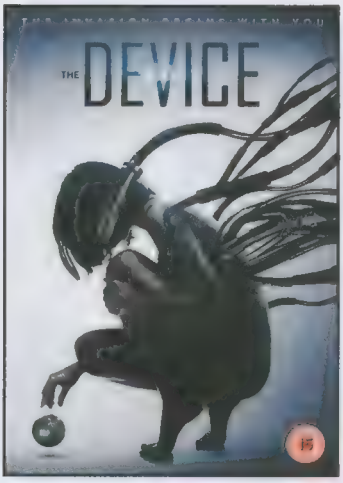
Over an hour's worth of dialogue that's either mumbled or shouted takes place on interiors lit by golden or sickly hues contrasted against the concrete-grey backdrop of urban Canada. Villeneuve strives for the moodiness of David Lynch (confirmed by the presence of Isabella Rossellini), but frequently lapses into an unfortunately dated visual style closer to Cronenberger detachment than Lynchian intensity. The tiresome and numbingly slow pace for this rather pedestrian storyline is enlivened by a strange prologue, one erotic/phantasmic dream, and a cult-worthy/curio twist-ending – none of which manage to elevate a determinedly un-American effort from its blatantly arty milieu into a full-blown genre piece. Richard Ayoade's *The Double* (*Interzone* #254) offers greater entertainment values.



A free-range *Cube*? *Lord of the Flies* meets the *Predator* franchise? Wes Ball's **THE MAZE RUNNER** (Blu-ray/DVD, 9 February) posits a novelty mission for new-kid-on-the-block Thomas (Dylan O'Brien, TV series *Teen Wolf*), freight-lifted to a walled glade where assorted boys survive as modern Tarzan/Robinson Crusoe recruits for a Spartan programme while living in fear of cyber-spiders lurking beyond their prison's perimeter. Even with sadly simplistic narrative rules, it still takes our young hero half an hour to get his Theseus on and slay a minotaur in this pseudo-labyrinth. Of course, everything changes for the boys' hormonal captivity when a first-and-last girl arrives.

Lurching out of the religious-allegory mode of its edenic-purgatory version of a creation myth ("People needed to believe we had a chance of getting out"), *The Maze Runner* copycats beats from other juveniles – like *Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, *Ender's Game*, etc – with its adolescence-is-a-battlefield motifs. But without two good ideas to rub together, the maker's fatal mistake is taking a ridiculously clichéd sci-fi adventure too seriously. In more experienced hands with an inventive adaptation, and/or better direction, the uninspired comic-bookish antics of this dystopian rebellion might have been considerable fun. Hopefully, this year's sequel *Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials* will expand on this milieu's possibilities outside the confinement of predictable genre nonsense.

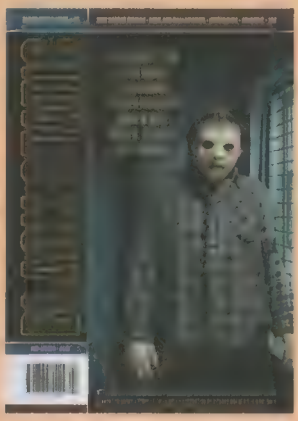
Daniel Simpson's bogus documentary *Hanger 10*, re-titled as **THE RENDLESHAM UFO INCIDENT** (DVD, 9 February), insults even the worst found-footage sci-fi. It's a sorry excuse for low-budget British genre work, too. Perhaps we should blame Chris Carter and *The X-Files* for making UFOlogy cool, instead of just a hobby for paranoid loonies and cranks who gave up on the religions handed down from their parents but still desperately need something to believe. Either way, any video from a flying saucer hotspot amounts to zero value, even as cheesy mystery. With amateurishness at every level of production, it remains quite baffling why such standards are tolerated – never mind accepted or welcomed – without any good or compelling reasons. But, seeing as the FF model is to modern cinema what school pantomime is to pro theatre, I wonder if such media hackwork is a perverse offshoot from kid-vids. Also, since the FF format and its pseudodocumentary cousin are patently derived from Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* radio drama in 1938, it's no surprise that sound frequently trumps imagery in corny or crappy movies like this one.



Dreary weird-soap at best, and sometimes arse-suckingly bad, **COHERENCE** (DVD, 16 February) is a dinner-party movie with comet-borne dream-twists. Co-writer and director James Ward Byrkit's first feature is a relationships drama that is troubled by quantum-theory pretensions and pseudo-arty significance. It's all over the place with improvised jabber, mysterious photos, cryptic notes, number puzzles, and differently coloured glow-sticks. Broken phones, power cuts and nocturnal stalker sightings all bedevil this gathering of close friends into foolish behavioural traits, as if the sociable stereotypes become shut-ins, portraying a fatigued observation of middle-class angst. "I just wanna see what the hell's out there!" Though it tries to play with *Twilight Zone* themes and import some of Shyamalan's fateful dreamscape-weaving (*Signs*, *Lady in the Water*, *The Happening*), there's not enough space or time, or budget, available to do justice to Byrkit's ideas for the movie. Genre complexity demands preparation, not the dicey spontaneity of improv theatre. Give this mess a miss and watch Christopher Smith's ambitious and successful mystery thriller *Triangle* (*Black Static* #15) again.

Tony reviews a lot more DVDs and Blu-rays in our sister magazine *Black Static*, often with easy to enter competitions to win some of those titles

In Black Static #45, out now, the home entertainment releases covered include:



The Guest, Dark House, Grace: The Possession, Jessabelle, The Babadook, The Calling, Annabelle, The Other, Clown, [REC] Apocalypse, Wolves, Horns, Zombie Resurrection, Doc of the Dead, Ninjas Vs. Monsters, Phobia, Hunting the Legend, Exists, Scar Tissue, A Haunting at Silver Falls, Kissing Darkness, Like Water For Chocolate, American Ghost Story, ABCs of Death 2

To take out a discounted dual subscription and have *Black Static* delivered at the same time as *Interzone* please visit ttapress.com/shop/

"Long live the unknown fathers!" Produced in 2009, Russian sci-fi **DARK PLANET** (DVD, 16 February) is adapted from *The Inhabited Island* (1969) by Boris and Arkady Strugatsky – the writers of *Roadside Picnic*, filmed by Tarkovsky as *Stalker*. Directed by Fedor Bondarchuk (maker of Soviet war movies *9th Company* and *Stalingrad*) it's a quite different picture to *Stalker* of course. *Dark Planet* is very much a compressed, almost stunted, epic. A Flash Gordon variant about revolutionary uprising on an alien world led by a young superhuman adventurer from the ideal society of a united Earth.

Blond spacer Maxim (alias Maksim) is shipwrecked on a colony that's stuck in a mishmash of industrial stagnation and futuristic propaganda. Although it's closer to *Brazil* than *Blade Runner*, Bondarchuk's opus manages to pay homage to everything from *Metropolis* to *Dune*. The lusciously weird plot is magnificently bonkers and very good fun, right from the comic-style credits sequence. There are many extraordinarily detailed and busy backgrounds, packed with jaw-dropping imagery, before the movie unleashes its political commentary that's reportedly quite faithful to the source novel.

Maksim meets waitress Rada and immediately falls in love, but goes off to join the elite guards of a distinctly totalitarian police. Thankfully, naive Mak soon suspects that terrorists hunted as freaks by the stormtroopers might actually be honest rebels against this society's 'saviours' – who are really just greedy men who control "the most hideous state in the history of the universe". As outsider champion in the fight against oppression and brainwashing from radiation towers ("Passion is in our blood"), our hero hijacks a tank to visit mutants in *Mad Max* territory, but fails to make good use of an old bomber airship. Going undercover as a convicted conscript in the enslaved army, Mak battles through an invasion, and when the war is lost a crusade against military dictators boils down to a final duel, with the people's freedom hanging in the balance.

Despite all the tech on show and *Matrix* style punch-ups ("I sink submarines. I'll fight inflation if I have to!"), *Dark Planet* is effectively a fast-paced urban fairy tale about defeating evil overlords and rescuing a damsel from her frozen prison cell. It is probably as close as Russian cinema has come to copying the *Star Wars* formula, and yet without a fraction of its template's success as box-office juggernaut. Despite some marvellous design work and high-quality special effects, *Dark Planet* is an actioner of merely incidental delights, not narrative coherence. The farce is strong with this one.

An orphaned tomboy with a sword called 'Needle' dreams of revenge while prancing around on a riverbank. The courtly rituals/customs of a new queen, in an airy throne room, are conducted partly in foreign tongues. A single cloaked figure strides across a frozen landscape of scattered corpses and fires. **GAME OF THRONES** (Season Four, DVD/Blu-ray, 16 February) re-mints iconic genre images with fresh gravity, startling melancholy, and painterly style. Framed for the young King Joffrey's murder (though we might say good riddance to a nasty little bully), dinky hero Tyrion (Peter Dinklage, *X-Men: Days of Future Past*) spends half of the season locked in a dungeon, waiting for his execution. "The world is overflowing with horrible things, but they're all a tray of cakes next to death."

As usual with *GoT* the season comprises only ten episodes, but each is packed with incidents of terror and horrific action, leavened by broadly humorous skits and a wit that's dry as bones in a desert. As ever, darkness illuminates the characters. From royal wedding poisoning to slave revolts, there is violent upheaval at every social level and location. Despite the familiarities of dragons and giants, mammoths and skeleton zombies, waves of shocks and gore compete with mocking awe, as the weak survive to die another day, the strong perish by happenstance, and numerous fantasy clichés are overturned or abandoned to favour quirks of imagination. The children's quest for the three-eyed raven trundles onwards, in contrast to the mismatched comedy double-act of reluctant knight Brienne and her hapless squire Podrick on the mountain way to an encounter with deadly force.

Developments like the post-trial duel of champions or the Black

Watch's battle against invading wildlings at the ice wall often keep us guessing until the last seconds of the final round who might win or lose. Whatever fate lands upon the heads of such lowborn warriors, the highborn elitists mirror the policies of today's corporate global politics and continue the practice of being at their worst when things are at their best.

However, there is another side to the GRRMverse saga of ice and fire that weakens it. Alan Alda's mildly satirical 1986 comedy about making movies, *Sweet Liberty*, noted that most pictures are constructed with appeal to rebellious teens. That's the modern 12–22 audience who enjoy watching protagonists 'defy authority' (individual political unrest from peasants to royalty), find it thrilling whenever action is simply to 'destroy property' (death and disaster for profit or fun), and are delighted with any excuse for occasions calculated to 'take people's clothes off' (nudity fascinates, sex sells).

Yes, *GoT* fulfils all the criteria for such populist demand, but does the intrigue and drama justify its basically juvenile antics? Is this lowbrow stuff balanced squarely by cerebral or philosophical concerns, and long-form storytelling invention? Does the TV show really have enough wit and wonder to rise above the mostly shallow conceits of its gossip-generating content? Undoubtedly, there's much poignancy and humanity to be found in the trials of its so-called 'beloved' characters, whether they are doomed or not. But in spite of its apparently mature approach to fantasy tropes (in contrast to many of the Tolkien imitators that sprouted CGI wings following the runaway success of Peter Jackson's *LotR* trilogy), it remains to be seen if *GoT* will or can avoid falling into a pit of demeaning repetition and diminishing returns in seasons and kingdoms to come.

While DC Comics' *Dark Knight* trilogy and *Man of Steel* shepherd superhero movies towards respectability as serious drama (though Ang Lee's *Hulk* remains the premier example of that form), perhaps there is still room enough in the multiverse pantheon for blatantly farcical variants like *Guardians of the Galaxy* if not *Howard the Duck*.

Since *I, Frankenstein* reworked a familiar monster creation into a heroic origin tale, *Star Trek* was remade as a superhero actioner (not space opera for the 21st century!), and even the mythic fantasy *Noah* was also a superheroic/disaster movie, it seemed inevitable that any successful franchise from the lunatic fringes of comicbooks would eventually be 'revisited'. So, that acute parody of vigilantism, **TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES** (DVD/Blu-ray, 16 February), erupts from well below the lines of comedic palatability, welcome or not, yet again.

An endearingly silly adventure? Okay, the boys are back in toon. Four reptilian underworld fighters led by a giant kung-fu rat named Splinter? Hell, yeah! But even a rodent sensei is no match for big bad cyber-samurai Shredder and his Foot clan army. Can charmless Megan Fox's nosy reporter cope with the dumb banter of turtlenadoes in Zorro masks, before the showdown on a designated New York rooftop? Neo-auteur from South Africa, Jonathan Liebesman – maker of that underwhelming sci-fi *Battle: Los Angeles* and sadly underappreciated fantasy sequel *Wrath of the Titans* – directs without a care in the world what critics think of his career choices. However, since the result of all his playfulness provokes just as many cringes as laughs, perhaps this new *TMNT* should carry a mental health warning: "Do not say a word about this to anyone."

"We'll test it. We'll make sure everything's safe." Obviously, a famous-last-words case. Not to be confused with a couple of television programmes also using the title, Richie Mehta's mystery movie **CONTINUUM** (aka *I'll Follow You Down*, DVD, 9 March) is about a physicist (Rufus Sewell) who vanishes, quite inexplicably, in the year 2000. Through a wormhole reaching back to 1946, he risks a solo trip to meet Einstein – for post-war nostalgia – but a seemingly fatal (Brundle-why?) glitch got into the time-pod with him and unforeseen events prevent his return. While the inventor's wife (Gillian Anderson, sleepwalking) never fully recovers from the loss or the mystery, her super-brainy son (Haley Joel Osment, *The Sixth Sense*) aims to crack apart this puzzle, fix a broken timeline, and save his doomed dad.

Primer without any such densely layered intrigue, *Looper* with knobs off, this is sadly more interested in the diversions of young romantic drama than fleshing out its multiverse paradox. It's the kind of boffin movie that reinforces the sci-fi cliché of how genius always solves problems by scribbling on walls – when they're not emoting fiercely with emotional confusion and a nearly obsessive determination to have their cake of happiness and eat it too.

As a second live-action spin-off addition to the military sci-fi game franchise, feature-length **HALO: NIGHTFALL** (DVD/Blu-ray, 16 March) is clearly inspired by *Aliens* with subgenre input from the *BSG* remake. When a peace treaty is broken by an alien suicide bomber, unleashing an unknown element that infects humanity on the planet Sedra, assorted space marines are launched on a secret mission to destroy the source, found only on the banana-strip fragment of a ring-world called Halo.

This is a handsomely produced but not very original action movie – apparently edited from a proposed TV series – that is eminently watchable as heavily-CGI'd space opera. The main problem with it is that it's completely derivative and uninteresting as SF drama. The participation of Ridley Scott (executive producer on the first 'episode') and Scott Free guarantees the visual style of *Blade Runner* is blatantly copied for city scenes, while Croatian director Sergio Mimica-Gezzan's TV work on *BSG* ensures that oversized guns and helmet HUDs adds verisimilitude, never mind all the unavoidably macho "oorah" clichés.

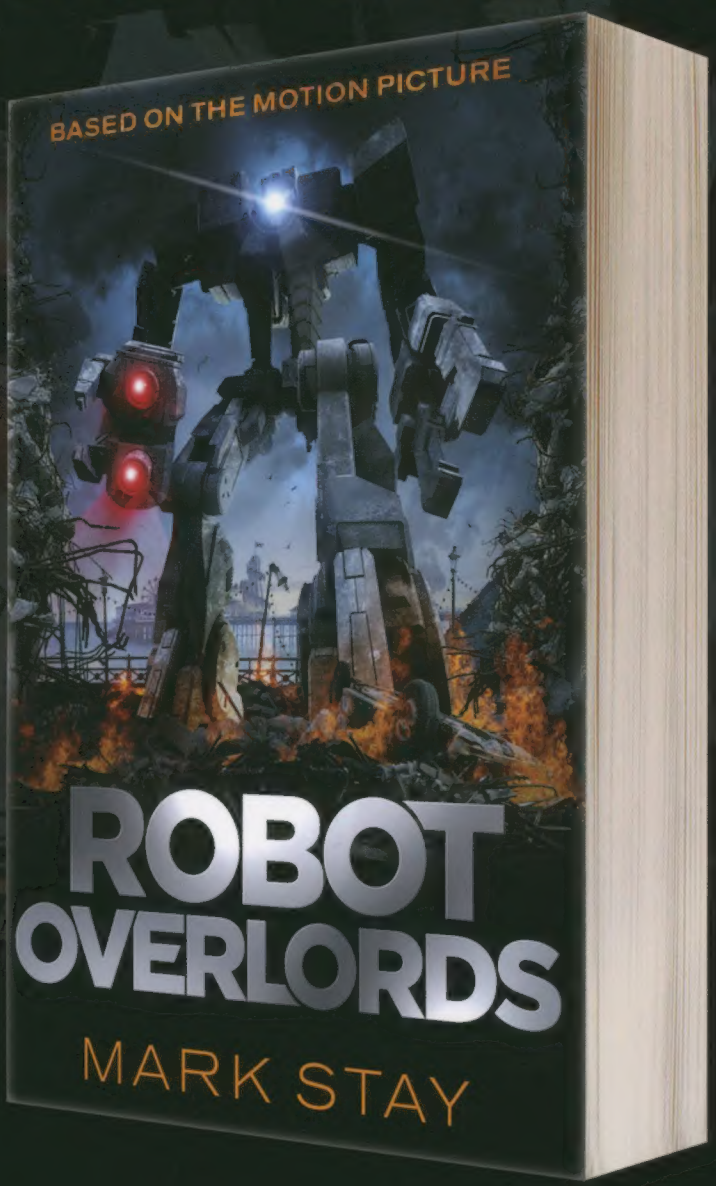
The worst sequences involve turgid scripting about the honour of soldiers, which is as mind-numbing as martial propaganda so often is and as ponderous as a political debate (based upon lies) for starting another war, while the supposedly philosophical guff about lifeboat choices also rings hollow. The main action concerns a descent into a canyon of volcanic/hellish conditions, that can be interpreted easily as dramatising a moral decline. Despite attacks by swarming wormy wildlife, this movie lacks any of the cool sci-fi concepts or the nightmarish verve of *Prometheus*.

"That is not a black box!" Maker of *The Invoking* (*Black Static* #40), Jeremy Berg's sophomore feature **THE DEVICE** (DVD, 23 March) is painfully slow, routine sci-fi that completely fails to live up to the *Ghost in the Shell* styled promise of its poster artwork. At a UFO crash site in the woods, two sisters find an alien sphere and take it home. They freak out when it makes them bleed and prompts nightmare visitations. There is no budget for anything very 'other', just lots of emoting instead of acting, conniptions with extra dialogue. Berg's dismal effort tells whenever it should show, but might be funny if it wasn't so pathetic. *Xtro* did all of this – and a lot more besides – with a far greater skiffy verve, bizarre horror and cult-movie appeal three decades ago!

"Just push from the inside out." William Eubank's **THE SIGNAL** (DVD, 13 April) begins as a road movie, with MIT students tracking down a hacker called 'Nomad'. They soon find themselves first-contact survivors, and Nic, Haley and Jonah are all held for study in a bunker complex of clinical labs. But nothing is what is seems here and when they escape from 'Area 51', the dumbfounded Nic eventually discovers they had no idea where they actually are or what's happened to them. Of course, Laurence Fishburne's presence as tricky Dr Damon lends events a quiet dignity. However, when the drama is scored by tinkly piano and bland synth drone, the sci-fi mystery unpacks with an excruciating slowness, never fully realistic enough for successful assemblage from its DIY-grade conspiracy blueprints and *X-Files* UFOlogy field-kit. The result is a pretentious reach for 'significance' without any meaning as narrative, or ambiguity.

It does not help matters that the movie's half done before Nic discovers that he has bionic legs. The subsequent road-to-nowhere chase sequence becomes laughably comicbook, before any remaining sense evaporates in the overheated space-operatic climax of a worldview pushed inside out. That might have worked for Takashi Miike, but the cumulative impact of such surrealism in-the-wild or jaw-dropping twists – as the building blocks of a filmmaker's career – require a staggeringly prolific output (of Miikean proportions!) that very few can match. As demonstrated in Eubank's *Love*, a ploddingly dull micro-budget debut about a space-station exile, the director appears to be someone who genuinely likes SF and cinema, and struggles to combine the two, but hasn't a clue how. So, what we get here is a mash-up of boringly familiar images/weird themes gathered without care or attention to storytelling details beyond a raid of sci-fi pick 'n' mix displays. As a genre think-piece *The Signal* is mostly white noise.

Stay in your homes.
THIS IS NOT A DRILL.



Would you survive the robot invasion?

Pick up or download your copy today

Start reading now: http://bit.ly/readrobotoverlords

www.gollancz.co.uk

Available on ebook